

THE Hudson REVIEW

A. R. AMMONS:

Summer Place—a long poem

MARY ANN MALINCHAK RISHEL:

Staus—a story

STEVEN HELMLING:

Yeats's Esoteric Comedy

MARVIN MUDRICK:

The Entertainer

GUY DAVENPORT:

Making It Uglier to the Airport

Poems by PHILIP BOOTH AND SYDNEY LEA.

Theatre Chronicle by JOHN SIMON.

Articles and Reviews by CHARLES W. MILLARD,

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VOLUME XXX
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SUMMER 1977

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To Our Readers

A new book by one of the editors of *THE HUDSON REVIEW* will be published in August. In accordance with our policy, the book will not be reviewed in these pages, but is listed below for the interest of our readers.

WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD: *Seeing Through Everything: English Writers 1918–1940.* Oxford University Press. \$10.00.

Publication of this issue has been made possible by a grant from the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines which it has made through funds received from the National Endowment for the Arts and from the New York State Council on the Arts.

Notes on Contributors

The Snow Poems, a new book of poetry by A. R. AMMONS, has just been published by Norton. Mr. Ammons is Professor of English at Cornell University.

MARY ANN MALINCHAK RISHEL* teaches writing at Ithaca College and is studying for her M.F.A. from Cornell University.

PHILIP BOOTH's most recent collection of poems is *Available Light* from Viking. When he is not in Maine, Mr. Booth teaches creative writing at Syracuse University.

SYDNEY LEA* is Assistant Professor of English at Dartmouth College and Chairman of the Writing Program.

STEVEN HELMLING* is a graduate student at Rutgers University. His essay won a prize established there in memory of Marius Bewley.

DAVID BROMWICH* teaches English at Yale University.

After forty years of teaching, ROBERT MARTIN ADAMS, a former Advisory Editor of this Review, is retiring from the University of California. To celebrate the occasion, he is publishing a book about the contemporary novel entitled *After Joyce* from Oxford University Press.

Asterisk indicates a new contributor.

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—Janet Brown, Brookline, MA.

"I enjoyed it immensely. There is something of a sensibility akin to Grace Paley's at times. The authority of the prose is extraordinary."

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NEW DIRECTIONS 33

The Fall 1976 issue of the *New Directions in Prose and Poetry* anthology has among its prose selections excerpts from works-in-progress by Martin Bax, Frederick Busch, Robert Nichols, and from the British semiotician Christine Brooke-Rose's novel *Thru*. Among the selected poems are a mini-anthology of Australian verse, a long devotional poem by Burmese writer U Win Pe, a verse narrative by the West German radio-playwright Rudiger Kremer, and "Horses Before Troy" by the Turkish writer, Melih Cevdet Anday. \$12.00; NDP419, \$3.95

NEW DIRECTIONS 34

This issue (Spring 1977) includes graphics—12 visual poems, a collection of photographed plastic images, from the Japanese avant-garde *Vou* group, neo-surrealist drawings by the Soviet artist Henry Elinson introduced by his fellow exile, the Estonian poet Alexis Rannit, and the art work of British poet Charles Tomlinson introduced by Octavio Paz. The written word (poetry, fiction and drama) comes from six other countries—Belgium, France, Greece, India, Sri Lanka, and the United States. \$12.00; NDP427, \$3.95

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A. R. AMMONS

Summer Place

The ocean will grind, yea or nay, the sky gape,
spiders will shake their lines, and cuneiform will
become photooffset or something or nothing: when

you consider the wreckage expectation and delivery
will wreak on each of us, though, it's a good thing,
probably, that other things and people won't care

about us as much as we do, thus moderating our own
cataclysmic perspectives: when I go, I shake the
universe I know loose: that this shakes me

more than the universe is some comfort, about all
I'm likely to get: everything that isn't trivial
could be made so: that would help keep things down:

my last fallacy of imitative form, my book on
roundness, disappointed me some (oh, yes, it did), I meant
to write one unreadable, but a lot of people have

bought it, reading it or not: I wanted something
standing recalcitrant in its own nasty massiveness,
bowing to no one, nonpatronizing and ungrateful:

I don't know why: maybe I'm just tired of the world's
inroads, the small invasions where my little landscapes
are stripped, defoliated, re-arranged:

or tired of being put upon by this and that person's
demand and need and having to swelter inside
with the moral melting of whether to do this and that

or not: this morning, I got a letter from this
Arkansas lady who runs a bookstore she says isn't
doing too well, and she wants me to sign a stack of

bookplates to help my books move: I already last year signed a bunch of my poems she had typed up on separate cards: I haven't forgotten I did that and

here she is back again: am I being played for a sucker: if I'm being played for a sucker, which is the thing to do, blink and be generous and help her even if she's

prevailing upon me or set the stage that I'm on to her and throw everything in the trash: it's not doing the thing, it's being put on the spot and

having (being made) to make a choice: that energy of decision is costly: you can't just make one decision and follow through, every decision is

different: it isn't easy, what would you do: then there are the recommendations, ooh, la, la, the letters of recommendation! no postage, no envelopes, no forms

filled out—just the command, send a letter of recommendation to so and so: or send a dozen: still no stamps, no envelopes, no forms filled out: you

get the picture: so thinking of an imagined land, I thought of a big gritty poem that would just stand there and spit, accommodating itself to nothing and

too disfigured to be approached, no one able to imagine what line to take: and not necessarily being interesting enough to invite anybody to read it:

nothing turns people off like complaining, they get enough of it doing their own, so why not have a complaining poem: that could core your reality and

stack up the peelings: Gary and I just went over to check out Corsons Inlet: there were a lot of bugs: (fellow said they said on the radio Fargo, North

Dakota (I thought that was in Nebraska) had a foot
of rain and the Red River, can you imagine, flooded):
this is not going to be another one of those free

association poems: this one is going to be all about
complaining, so there's no point in getting limbered
up for heavy swerves, this is going to run right down

the centrality, clickety-clack: at Corsons Inlet they
had the Least, Arctic, and Common Tern, but the Least
were raising the most babies and the most hell: they

made a community project of hovering, circling around,
diving, and screeching: but we found the young about
hiding in the stalks of compass grass and right out

on the clam-shell white sand were indentations,
nests, one or two eggs in each: we walked
crisply on the clam shells so as not to step on the

eggs: then we stopped at a place for a dollar's worth
of ice tea, two fifty-cent sizes: it sure was hot out
there on the sea plains but the ocean has added another

seventy-five yards to the headland: (the same land it's
been subtracting from the north end of the island where
bulwarks and jettys are doing very little

to retain the retaining walls:) how does the ocean
get into these persistent notions: it's hard not to get
interested in something: there seemed sheer strength

in the numbers of blackflies waving over and sucking on
the inlet strand, multitudes, you kick them up before
you like sand or, more persistingly, like fog: you know

they all have to be doing the same thing approximately
because there're too many of them to be doing different
things: just like the sand-ripples on the headland, how

could you design something that all looks alike but every one is different: a studious drawingboard: same with the lacework castings of the sandworms, a filigree

incalculable, though pretty much the same: so it's all there, who wants to be stunned by it over and over: desire is incredible anywhere and I have a lot myself:

insatiable because unsatisfied: yep: burning all the time doing time in the dungeon: if it got loose it would fire off an acre of trees: this is my worst complaint, that

desire often has to be held back and stanchd: but holding back gives you plenty of energy to complain with: look for a long piece: a windstorm just struck up

a sandstorm here, the winds going quite precisely from easy-going to whistling, a sharp change, hard enough to walk off with a tin shack: and the storm so

fast, it seems to have no lightning in it—and no rain, a blower, mixing too many levels perhaps for charges to build up: but somewhere back there in

the west is a nucleus, storm center or cell, for all this commotion: I hope there will be some rain to lay the dust: but how nice to be cooled off: ninety

degree days are not as nice as less than ninety degree days: nice to see trash rise, swirl, slam against houses and linepoles: beach chairs bloom woven

bottoms and kilter off like the awkwardest bird across the beach: sand in flumes spills like water down into the surf, frying in a frying: I'm in this

place and everybody is having this banquet, except me, I have this dry crust I'm nibbling on: so I say, how come I'm not having a banquet like the rest of you guys, don't

I have as much right as anybody: the banqueters say,
hunger will sharpen your perceptions and your perceptions
will be useful to us should we ever get hungry:

oh, flubbery flubs, I say, neologizing: I don't care a hang
about your perceptions or mine either, I'm hungry: if
I can't have any of what you're eating, give me

something else: you would be surprised at the fat indifference
of people at a time like that: call them a bunch of
hogs and go off and eat the wind, what else: and suckle

the rain and pretty soon you're a nature poet, everybody
saying, lands, something nice to go with dinner, they say he
enjoys plants and feeds ants, a luminous starvation:

I have this theory about when people want you to assume
the position of maximum receptivity or penitence they
don't tell you to sit down but to get down on your knees:

that, in relation to the person who just told you to
get down on your knees, leaves you looking into the
genital area, a dark, winding, if absorbing, subject:

in that position you can receive the rod of knowledge
head-on, or if you don't receive it, you can get the
image what you could receive if you don't do right:

almost anybody would rather do right, specially if the
commander is a beast: where this puts some men and women, who
might get a small thrill from the warning and who might

not decide to do right, I don't quite know if I haven't
already said it: but it appears that the sexes *are*
different, if equal: hustler or hooker, different

postures suggest different approaches: any way to make a
buck, if you consider that one amoeba eats
indigestible sand which it pushes out to the periphery

of its protoplasm to form a casing, a little house
not all flesh: a nature poet would be the first to
tell you that any way to get by is worth exploring:

of course, I don't mean to say anything mean about
ants or other clever insects, builders, twirlers,
weavers, stickers, and domicile developers: ever

since, which was some time ago in reading Wheeler,
I heard about the ant that attaches itself to the
chamber wall and allows itself to be fed till it's a

honey storage tank, well, I've been touched: it
reminds me of myself in reverse: I've been storing
up honey in civilization but though much emptied out,

I don't get any emptier than I've always been: I was
born on a farm and had to work and never got much
book learning or much interest in it but I don't mind it in

others, really, provided it doesn't swell to cause
nonconversational flotation: I object to much bobbing
while I'm talking: I prefer people who simmer down

and change the subject often, without flightiness: I
don't like people who flit from branch to branch of
the learning tree so fast I can't spot their majors

from their minors: but then I don't like people who
take off to say something and then just quit midway:
it's like leaving a bird permanently between bushes:

I can tell you right now I don't know how to write
verse, not even poetry: if I did I wouldn't be here,
so to speak: I'd be off on a Greek island with Merrill

or in the radiantly inaccessible regions with Ashbery
or vanishing into the clearest plenitudes with Merwin
or reading from my works to the Poetry Society of

America or South Orangeburg or I'd be mumbling among
the members of the Academy of This or That instead of
just sweating it out as America's Least Likely Product:

that is, don't send me your poems, please, for comment
and/or criticism: I don't know what to say: not only
don't I know what you should write, or how, I don't

know what or how I should write: if I did I: I'll
tell you what I do do, though: if I think of something,
I give it a whirl: if it comes off, well, it's

merciful: if it doesn't, I still can't throw it away,
but I keep it around hoping it will flare out or up eventually:
join or form and join a local group where you can share

your poems, see what others are doing: every now
and then read a good poem, if you can find one you didn't write
yourself: I'm interested in you: but I can't, since

there's one of me and fourteen billion of you, answer
all the letters and provide hopeful hints: I say
there's only one of me because though every letter

begins "I know you must hear from a lot of people but"
what every letter means is forget about those other
people and give me your undaunted attention: this that

I'm complaining about is not metaphysical: don't look
to hear from me: I don't have the secretary, the
postage, or the know-how to come back at you: believe

me: why is it that doctors expect to be paid for their
time and lawyers and bowling coaches for their
time but nobody expects to pay a poet: I guess poets

are supposed to be so used to poverty they don't need
any money: I suggest you send your poems to Galway
Kinnell who knows a lot about the art of poetry or to

Richard Howard who can afford the postage: don't send
to John Hollander who knows so much about the art of
poetry you wouldn't understand a thing he said:

what gets you around here are the raunchy, skinny
bellies of coeds with the pear-like rump rondure
sloping over the dinky-little bicycle seats: wouldn't

it be fun to be leather: such starvation, what
gauntness of sinew and vein, what personal hairpullings
and twistings with the sheets, what hold-overs and

backorders, what lineations described with delight's
elaboration, what fingers in the mind twiddling, flicking,
what sudden bombastic progressions and reversals, what

braidings and upbraidings of the rope of the self, what
profiles, weights, curvings inward and outward, what a
time I'm going to have with women's movements, Adrienne

is going to give me the sullen, if understanding and
patient, eye and then burst into an oratorio of
verse-like abuse! Denise is off there by herself, now:

she won, her victory our embarrassment: how I wish I
would hear from *her*! what old-style men wanted of women
was to get them down, fill them up, and go play golf,

leaving the ladies to simmer in fruitfulness, wondering
what hit them, drenching and draining: new-style men
have to remember that ladies like to play golf, too:

a quaint plainness with full-scale cool reservation and
qualification qualifying qualification, rhythm undecided,
and explosive small gesturing: somewhere in there is

the truly heroic scale, the mind at a sufficient standstill,
the underview amounting to a wide cancellation like
space: oh, if only one could get to it, without

meanwhile raising a bristle! how delightful to be so
accomplished you're completely unread! practically too
much to imagine with coolness: well, it's the 4th or

firth of forth and last night's storm cleared the air
which, however, filled the highways this morning, every
other Philadelphian coming down to regard the waves

and the other Philadelphians: what a herculean act of the
imagination to imagine Philadelphia imagining itself in America!
you could draw a sharp line around Philadelphia, take it out,

and no one, not even non-Philadelphian, would notice:
I guess it's because so much of our heritage is buried
there: a prayer for flatness: what do

you do with flatness: you can't pray for it, prayer
too much into high rise: you could say, today I'm to be
flattened out on the floor or the self's sills:

sublime (or counter sublime) as I am, I walk back from
the beach by all the bathing beauties and bathing boys,
and by the older folks in good houses, and I feel like

a bit of country trash, a splint of nothing washed up on
the planks of time, and I feel impressed that all those
people have made something important of themselves with

less cloth, probably, than I have: I hand it to them
(the importance, but I would also hand them the cloth)
and think, how nice for you, you've found a suitable,

dense smallness of the exact gravity and grist of your
body, and there you are, unfloatingly answering the
universe, that is, being integral with it and paying it

no mind: I found a dime on the way back: that's the
interest on two dollars for a whole year or maybe the
interest on a million dollars for a second: the faucets

here have water misty with microwaterbubbles, milky
in look: I fill a glass and, though trash, go ga-ga,
marveling, something I do circumspectedly and limitedly

these days: the bottom starts to clear as the bubbles
rise and pretty soon you start to hear a fizz, specks
of peppery water flying off the surface: and when the

fizz is wildest, a motion counterclockwise commences,
as if the motion in the airiness could take hold or
express itself better: then I observe that the bubbles

don't break in a continuous fizz but rapidly flash in
patches big as your index fingerprint: when nearly all
the bubbles are gone, the motion ends and fringe reefs,

as around atolls, stand like a long foam: I figure with
precise instruments, I could discover a lot, quite
useless, probably: the marvelous useless, though, seems

more marvelous than the plain marvelous: but I just
drink the water: soothing occlusion: where can I find
any junk: every street or alley I look into bedazzles

me with poetry, the call to naming, to saying forth,
to being said forth: when I get the fences, lightpoles,
ladders, plastic tricycles, cracked concrete slabs all

together in a heap the heap will round up and bloom
into the shapeliest rose: today, I am filled with anger,
the worst-looking thing in the house or on the street:

it's a fifth: last night they had a fourth, a boom-boom
show, pow, pow, k-choom: everybody that could get
there got there, wheelchairs, forearm walking braces,

canes, four-footed canes, tricycles, bicycles, motor
bikes and cycles, skating boards, and jams and jams
of cars: one ought to try to define what is so great

about a fireworks (firewords) show and then design a theory
of poetry around the definitions: I guess colorful
explosions are, by all odds, what we most adore:

and the, even more, colorful explosions that assume
sky-high figure, umbrellas of downspinning, metronomic
regularity of hard staccato with the punctuating white

terminal stab: dit, dit, dit, dit, WHAM: and the
transitoriness of it all, worse than day lilies, calls
out the hunger of immediate appreciation or loss of

life: everybody wants a community of shared perceptions
and with fireworks you get the community: last year
we had a well-publicized poetry show and attracted

fifteen people: half of them, approximately, were the
performers, and the other half, scattered and roped
wives, husbands, cousins, intimate friends: it was

not a good show: if you want the community to turn out
don't build a church, ballet theatre, sound stage,
art museum or any of those expensive, cultural things:

this is the difference in a democracy: the money is
where the people is: in the old days, the money was
where the people wasn't: so, I guess we'll have to

adjust: 199 years independent, we may learn yet that
a servitude to numbers is still servitude: and worse,
the few are run out of face into comedy at their

gatherings, having no glitter of diamond, even, to sanction
the glitter of mind: our artists to the trash pile!
of course: well, let us make a mess of trash:

politically equal (in theory), let us begin to form an
aristocracy of life (in fact): (let us make certain
our group does not form out of public, governmental

funds: wherever there are funds, mediocre managers
gather to swivel and sway: they create objectives and
the objectives are wrong: they create evaluations and

don't know what they're talking about: they seize the
power stick and they know they have the right instrument
and they "help" you right out of your mind: ta ta:)

this is Feeding the Fucking Sparrows Day: why not:
they make a round table out of a slice of bread:
an occasional fluttering, peckery disagreement, but

then right back to it: funny, though, they eat the
table which, nonArthurian, goes from square to round, then
tears away in chunks till it's flown away as all-day

providers: over nothing there is no disagreement: but
it's hard to keep Feeding the Fucking Sparrows Day from
becoming also Feeding the Fucking Starlings Day and

Feeding the Fucking Grackles Day: purity needs a
mixture to know itself by: a lively play of the mind
over the particulars like wind over the inlet tide:

tomorrow we will have another Day called Listening
for the Sparrows to Cut the Fucking Cheese Day: yesterday
was Independence Day: someday we will have to call a

Day Interdependence Day: neither sincere nor serious,
I hesitate to engage anything above the level of a
broken bottle for fear of being, in a free state,

misunderstood or investigated: questioned closely, I
would have to admit that the America I love is hardly
in prevalent view so it must be somewhere hiding around

weeds, fencerows, windowboxes, railsidings, and abandoned
roads: hiding around abandoned roads is a good one:
what would you say differentiates the highminded from

the lowdown good-for-nothings: clearly, it's a matter
of altitude: but altitude in terms of what:
perhaps, it is representativeness, including the

principles of synopsis, assimilation, concept: then
there's high society as over and against the low, common,
and vulgar: then there are high places (where the rich

live): everything high appears to be desireable except
high meat prices: why is that: I'm just sure that our
fundamental image is hierarchial, disposed like a

mountain with the wide and numerous low shrinking to the
narrow and lofty few: thank goodness, I'm the very
peakstone of something, a mt, though I don't know how high

it is: it is not as high as General Motors or even
Anaconda Copper or Kennecott: it's about as high as
up to here: anyhow, I'm sitting on it: it feels good:

bowling champions make twelve times as much as poetry
champions: pool sharks about ten: tennis, fifty, etc:
poetry is a range of ridges which, however, rises:

since (life is a terminal disorder) to choose to gogo
forward into life, or a makeshift thereof, is also
to choose death, it's hard to get everybody up and out in

the morning bushy with appetite: but nature to
prevent bitching makes it bindingly easy on us by
providing only one way to go(go), choose it or not, a

half-reassuring nudge or fate-motif that relieves us
of the responsibility for any ultimate disposition
to things: the sparrow lights in the steel fence mesh

and cheeps: (note the two orders of statement): one
is endlessly expandable and conditional and the other
firm and complete:) we had the fifth last night: I

mean the last of the fifth: today is the sixth: last night was the drum and bugle corps competition: every corps should have won, although some should have won

more than others: I liked St. Ignatius from Hicksville best though, although the leader was great, I liked the leader of the first corps better—the Black Watch, I

think: she was heartbreakingly beautiful: I loved her instantly as I must love her forever: though she was in perfect command, she was not commanding: that is,

command was not so much in question as to be required: her high-stepping stills were all the same, rigorous and to the exact height: when she walked,

when she walked her right fist came to her chin, her left hand flicked out behind her, completely feminine in a total dignity: she never once seemed self-conscious

or out of role: even in her salute to the audience her participation was altogether with the corps: at the end, when the corps paraded by the stands, she did

not yield a flicker of acknowledgment, but held her part strict and clear: the other leaders, grand as they were, introduced some spoiling bit of sentimentality or

grossness: ah, when the thing is flawlessly done! and done pleasingly, not to please: it is an unbearably, I say, noble and generous use of the self, a beauty beyond

every demand or contingency, a beauty in itself: this is not a matter of content or invention: the creator of the routine has his own place: this is performance

when the performance itself creates clutches of value: I've heard performers, musicians, dancers knocked because they were the puppets of original genius but performance

exceeds creativity into its own genius: this is the beauty
of "Do the villanelle and shut up": here I'm
working the antipode, the exact opposite: the slouch,

the shambles, the crying out, the sore toe, bum knee
after the show is over: but this is the sixth: it
is Feeding the Fucking Sparrows Again Day: it's the

same if you look for junky language: in a way one hunk
of idiom floats swirls of energy as well as another:
get your afflatus flattened, it just takes on prevalence:

masturbation is handy, cheap, and clean: it engorges
itself on phantasy, the line between the imagination
and the seminal vesicle direct: hit the right image

and you come immediately: the scrotum is the conjurer's
bag of stones, bones, trinkets that are spilled out
and sorted through till the sought image turns up,

inflaming in its finding, desire seized and placed
in context and given course: these little trinkets
touch off the deepest reservoirs of the self, unlock

releases, the truest version: deepest are images of
the other, or the same, or some detail or part of the
other or the same, or even an image of the whole

spiritual self of the other, or an image of the other's
response, as seen in eyes or felt as through the central
line of the imagination: any way to get there is the

necessary way: any way that leads away ranges farthest
and most accurately when it keeps its holding there:
so we are in ourselves men and women, some of us with

phantasies that derive from and play into reality, some
of us with phantasies reality cannot support or fulfill:
nevertheless, crippled or distraught, we are members one

of another, truly, and must appeal outwardly to rights
and responsibilities: it is hard to be whole, unless it
is quite easy: anyway, we know, as when we hug a son,

the spirit *flows*, it moves from the full self into the
need: the transportation feels actual and
physical: similar transmissions occur when one's arms

are around the beloved or when one thinks of a friend
away: these are the knowledges that lie lowest and rise
highest in us: the bailiwick of love that best allows

and describes us: still, it is so hard to write
significantly of insignificant nothingnesses: until
the poet comes, Wilbur or Wakoski, we must wait to see:

yesterday was 7-5-75: today next year will be 7-6-76:
then there will be the once-in-a-decade 7-7-77, century:
boy, innertube, and creek: get away with this: you can't

go by me: cutting figures gets a big hohum: why's a man
like you a man like you: rock has gutlevel appeal,
simplicity, and story line: plowed fields patched here

and there with brilliant standing water: Yeats would
have been okay if he hadn't named his wife George:
careful that the truth that sets you free doesn't kill

somebody else: the poet of nature or of civilization
reports a human seeing: the longest thing in North
Carolina is Sunday morning: sex is at the bottom of

things: circle around the truth without telling
it and you tell it: clearing, thicket: a poem
is a thicket whose clearing is disposition: you find

as much interest in the world as you have in it: you're
practically rotten before you're ripe: day makes light
of night: (realism, mimetic representation: copying,

in different dimensions and modes the apparently real world the way it, to all appearances, really is): there are two heavens, one is this world's pleasure: the other

is release from this world's pain: well, the juice has expired and the therapy has run out of this: it is the next day, no apparent improvement over the preceding:

it is Monday, July 7, 1975: the big weekend is over, including, I hope, the all-night bouts and brawls in the house next door where a bunch of young fellows are

doing a little renting: the music loud and bumpy from midnight on, the girls in gales of hightalk and humor, the men resorting to blows: the motorcycles at 3 a.m.

tearing up the backyard and getting stuck in the beach sand of the tearing: a kind of middle class, vacationing howl: I should call this Get the Fuck Out Day: but to

where: *this* is my last resort: the dog across the street that for two summers hung over the fence yelping to whistling hysteria at every passerby till two in the

morning has been stationed back a ways behind the filling station: he still yaps but not with such proximal intensity: to make up for it, the lady next door has

acquired a youngling which barks with youthful expectation whenever possible: the noise level here is the sound equivalent of the trash level, including trashtruck noise:

poets have no intention of saying what they mean: so they say something else that means what they mean: this reeling looking-around connects disparate areas

and through gravity compels them to form a globe; similitude and metaphor having arisen: in swerving away from the direct telling, the poet incorporates

related areas of the world within his swerves, the
bindings of avoidance: I spend a good deal of the
day rocking on the front porch girl watching: or

boy watching: what with the long hair and slender
shapely backs you can get pretty far into admiration
before you realize it's a boy: that's a puzzling,

stalling, acrid feeling, going in under the concept
girl and backing out under different auspices: well,
we're told to love everybody and such confusion makes

it a lot easier: I wish everybody would go to his
library or neighbor and find out what ragweed is: then
if everybody would just see to his own place, we could,

I'll bet, get all or most of the ragweed pulled up today:
it's not that hard to pull it up, specially the month
before it blooms when it stands about a foot or less:

I just pulled up two plants growing at the foot of the
telephone pole next to the gas station: then I pulled
up in five minutes a sight of small plants behind

the gas station where there's a discontinuity of soil between
the street and the elevated pouring for the station:
if everybody on his lot would get together and pull

together, we could plink every plant out in an hour:
of course, ragweed pollen is so fine it will float in
from anywhere: but local effects can have some effect:

let's try it, everybody: pitch in and pull up: some
kid or assless old man or watery-thighed old woman might
get a little relief: relief is what we're after: I've

been so overstimulated lately it's been frantic: I've
screwed and otherwise engineered myself down to blanks
but the continual flow of barefooted, half-naked nymphs

by the door, and firm, phallic-bodied youths, has
 kept me in a constant, surprised knowledge of the reality:
 I really don't know what else to try, to get relief from

relief: I'm afraid I'm going to wear myself out: back,
 as far as I'm concerned, to Feeding the Fucking Superego:
 or Counting the Cottonpicking Cracks in the Sidewalk:

this one gal last night at the gala said, "That's not what
 my father said, my father said, 'If you get pregnant, I'll
 kill you' ": and this morning as I was pricking along the

sidewalk, I heard this lady on the second floor porch say,
 I'll be glad when I'm a senior citizen, the senior
 citizens cash in on so many advantages, I can't wait till

I'm a senior citizen: said she: now, that, I thought, is
 the way to do it: I was pricking along to the library to
 look up *trash* in the unabridged: I got it all down,

every bit of it, including the *white*: even the bottom
 leaves on tobacco, cropped first, sandlugs, when cured
 brown and papery: I bought my first bicycle when I was

15, I think, by being given the first pickings of the trash:
 I'm not just trash or white trash or country trash, I'm
 tobacco country trash, high-principled Scotch-Irish,

poor white, redneck, riffraff trash: I know all about
 it: and a lot about the other trash around: I take a
 trashy view of things: but, then, baby, I love what

I know, and I know trash, there's so much of it, democratic,
 everything turns into it, and so few people want
 it, there's a surplus of it, pick up free: now, when Stevens

got on to the prospect of a coat-of-arms or royal lineage
 back there in Dutchland, he plowed a little money into
 discovery: my money's in the bank and here and

there, and, right now, thank you, I don't need any: the
only royalty I'm ever going to be interested in is royalties:
more and more, there're going to be so many I'll

sway back and dig imperialism: from where I started the
route was up or forget it, and I've come most of the way:
people have heard of me never heard of Amenhotep, who swayed:

I'm a born aristocrat, as anybody will tell you: it's
unfortunate there were no funds to carry me off: I
recognized the poet, the trashiest breed, right away as

my most perfect and friendly apprehension: so I have
become if not king of the cats, prince of the hogs & snakes:
it tightens my nose and makes me feel possum-hungry just

to think of it: I'm going to sway my trash around until
every elegance wilts: nobody has established a more
cordial relationship with the heights than I have, a fact

which has already caused the elegance to shrink even before
it's going to have a chance to wilt: but my sway will, as
time goes on, become the new elegance, bumpy and roughshod:

take the old geezers and other rest-home spindly drifts of
flesh: now, that's *trash*: or how about all
the mentally retarded or disturbed children or old folks:

lesbians and queers of all varieties: migrant workers,
not getting anywhere: strung-out guitar pickers at
hopeless junction so and so: aging hookers and johns who

helped with the tide: retired persons: little old
ladies floated up in Florida, no husband, no home
no children who want them, and not enough to eat:

we should call this The Republic of Barrels of Trash: we could
now be entering the bicentennial year of The United States of
Barreling Trash: "pretty soon the people on welfare gone

be richer than working people”: The United States of
Shining Garbage from Sea to Greasy Sea: the litter
glitter: all that remains of free enterprise is if

you fail you deserve it: the land of the hopeless case:
the land of the biggest lobby: we know what is right:
when are we going to make it right: every legislature

knows but what’s right is so plain it’s embarrassing:
the corporation, the military, the agency: the power
blocks: all have exceeded the guidance and correction

of the people: can here and there an honest man stand
up and not lose his job: can here and there a
decision-maker decide what he knows he should: not

very likely: it’s okay if some have more if others
have enough: well, get out money for the trash to meet
my pure country trash platitudes: I have not given the

matter under study much study: I’m going to study up on it:
surely, lean, firm energies and rightnesses are found unanticipated
in free competition: but then you need to be sure the

competition is not rigged: surely people who find
and make things deserve to be rewarded: but the lean,
firm energies throw some people aside: we need to keep

the energies but we need to correct them from abuse,
the particular cases of mischance, sharpfallen destitution,
of suffering and disaffiliation: we need to sustain the

fallen and extend opportunity to the fallen who can
rise: it is not a great country that grinds along on
the spills and breakage of the weak: it may be strong

but it is not noble: this is a noble nation: it must
be great and noble: it must do what is right to do:
it must hold back the chomping greedy, nourish the needy:

my trouble as a propagandist is that I want everybody to be right (and, of course, happy): but is that, like, nobody right or happy: ah, these spheral men: they

stand there looking all ways till their feet rot off: what we need is for someone to choose one thing instead of another: and choose something that will carry at

least a 60/40 ratio of good: when in again pops the spheral man in a wheelchair saying, well, then, get it on up to 90/10 or 100/0: and there you are: if we could

make a kebab of principle and skewer our chunks of expedient deals with rightness running through, the republic might shine otherwise and we could

call it The Land of Rightness Shining Through the Roasted Morsels: everybody knows it's the awkwardest thing each one standing around the fire with a raw piece

of meat in his hand, shoving and snitching and forming Cartels of Power to the Flames, or Clearing Little Guys out of the Way to the Fire: a few

principles could lend so much structure to deals there'd be a lot less haggling over shady adjustments of the moral or morsel self: but who will rise and announce

the structure of the elevations: who will accept the skewer of backbone in his own hanging meat: if the government becomes unworthy of the people, it's a fine

opportunity for someone as worthy as the people to get up and say, the people are worthy, and I am worthy: the machine probably wouldn't re-elect him but what a

button of fresh air, could get to be habit forming: I went over to the Atlantic this morning and said, simply, long may you wave: the Atlantic didn't say anything

but it waved: put yourself in certain places, it will
be thought of you automatically that you don't amount
to anything or you wouldn't be there: au contraire,

get, by hook or crook, in to other places you will
automatically be thought something: there is, then,
obviously a genius to a place, a place spirit; for

example, the bar of the Fontainebleu has not quite the
aura of a coffeehouse: likewise the executive suite
at General Motors does not compare with the Lower East

Side: the genius runs people away or attracts them as
their own genius finds corresponding influences: feeling
"out of place" is unnerving for anybody: practically:

this is a high floral season: pussyfoot clover has
shot up and died: common plaintain is mid-cone in
thready bloom: slight hawkweed is putting yellow

buttons a foot off the ground: woolly mullein is
breaking out halfway up into a flowering inferno:
for the gross showy, there is purple vetch stringing

up fields, chicory looking windy, butterflyweed too
early for butterflies, wild yellow daisies, and other
sanguine displays: it was today (7-8-75) a page ago:

today was Having Lunch with the Fucking Photography
Committee

Day: pecan pie was a dollar a wedge: bavarian creme
pie, only 80¢: (that *only's* going to have a different

tone when bcp is \$1.60): the mt goes, how's it
going today: I go, it's going fine: the mt goes,
we going to get anything going today: I go, how's

it going with you: going fine, the mt goes: I go,
what do you say we get going: the mt goes, come:
one way to write is not for permanent improvement but

just to give the reader a place to be while he's there:
he might want to come back later and be there again:
even stuff written for long, arduous, out-of-time

contemplation and permanent improvement can hope for
nothing better than that: make an interesting place,
people will visit: there's just not that much call

these days for polished doldrums (that's doldrums with
a sea to shiny sea): people are interested in
trash: that's where pretension goes to take a spill:

gulls, old model cars (or new smashy ones), sugar
maples coming up bubbly through hoods, where hoods *were*:
real rank weeds in the cooled, shoved-over sections:

cartons with good directions, This Side Up, Keep Dry,
Handle with Care: translatable into tender
philosophy: a good read: a place you can come as you

are to: after a while, unrelieved relaxation makes
you nervous: how I hate these summer vacations of
concentrated domesticity when you go straight from

having too much to do to having nothing to do, blanks
of time tumbling through you in which you can tumble
the time through you or climb walls: or write dumb

poems (like this one) so full of crazy ironies warping
around inside themselves and folding over themselves
it's a wonder they don't give birth to snakes:

what *is* it I want to do for my country: I mean, as a
poet: that is, if I could get anybody to read the
stuff: as if reading about something would make it come

true: that is, if I could come up with something worth
coming true: Dean Martin has more effect on this
country in a minute than I have in a lifetime: still,

I want to do something, however cheap and narrow, for
my country or four or five people who know me: but
if I did something for four or five people, I would

want it to be in line with a larger good: I guess I
should forget the grandiose, and all distant approaches
to it, and just say how I feel: well, I feel lousy:

I feel lousy, though, mainly because I can't get through
to do anything good for my country: it matters how
your relations with your wife are holding up, how great a

father you are, whether you're making progress with
the oedipal situation or learning how to mosey with
your peers: but the local effect does not suffice:

profound emotions of allegiance and patriotism (the most
profoundly selfless emotion, probably) are with us,
if not now much in the wear: I want to relate locally,

but I want the local also to rise to join other locals
till you get something like a union: I want a top that
shines and turns influence back on me: I'm tired

of the hollow in myself that only damage comes to wound
again: I'm tired of feeling that here on North Street
I have no neighbor in Mississippi or Wyoming or in the

lower Shenandoah Valley or along the winding byways of
the Blue Ridge (how beautiful, it lies like a long
float on the land, misty with heat or humidity or

pollution): I don't want to be by myself: I don't
want anybody else to be by himself much: I don't mind being
alone; it's loneliness that gets me: I'd do anything I

could if anybody else would do anything he could: back
to the trash, back to this, this home away from home:
it's hard for a child to learn that adults are flawed,

even corrupt: this young country hasn't learned that
corruption is the way: when it learns that,
maybe it can accept it or change it: the people look

sad on the porches: the children play but seem puzzled:
the old ladies don't trust the street: the young men
and women, uncalled for, are unemployed: braggadocio:

you may be the type of person who can't understand
why anybody would want to write poetry, let alone
read it: that's where the reading mainly is, let

alone: most people would rather be a fountain than
a basin, for some reason: but as for writing, why,
it's like walking, you aren't working but you aren't

doing nothing: but walking this morning, I heard the
painter say to the kid, "You aren't allowed on the
ladder, period": allowed on the ladder: I took

yesterday off: why not work a day and rest a week:
I don't know if I had worked a week, but I rested a
day: I called it Knocking the Fucking Bitching

Off a Day Day: as a transcendental affirmationalist
I undergo throes complaining: I do better thinking
there must be some reason to go on living: bitching

can get you in the worst frame of mind: you think,
what can I find to bitch about today: and you can
find something: that's the leanest reassurance:

is a tree a concrete thing: right: I mean, maybe:
that is, it's a specific location and disposition:
not abstract: all right, all right: (who's talking):

it's also a microclimate: but in so many ways: it
absorbs radiation, it shades the ground, it moistens
the environment, it slows the wind: but then the

corner concrete (not abstract) is also a microclimate:
it bakes in the hot sun, an egg-frier: then there's
the black macadam and the white streak, minority white,

a climate in a climate: then there are the windy
corners (fairly abstract), puddles, marigolds: all
contribute microclimates to the high summation when

the fellow on the radio says, it's eighty-five degrees:
everything about works that way, from the dense local
to the synopsis: a waste is a terrible thing to mind:

we're getting a gospel singing group, The Rock of
Ages: what a very different effect would be The Ages
of Rock: this is 7-10-75: started back a way with

"you may be the type": I'm the typist: when the
going gets tough, the tough get going: I go warm up
the coffee: (it has worked its way up from the wind

through the waters, the leaves of bushes and branches,
tangles and brambles, risen to summits and made
space, rounded out the vision to the lay of land

and lands and now it looks into the human eye: what
is it: it is the viability, the coherence, that has
assumed disposition: nearly mute, having been mute a

while, it wants to have a program but fears the layout
of justice to each detail will deprive amelioration of
direction and force, that what is is so because it has

worked itself out through necessity: wisdom will not
fool with the just and fear assails the disruptive
song introduced to turn the balanced unbalanced right:)

aggravated: can't handle the pile-up of phobias: can't
deal with tunnels, bridges, gaps: can't get around much
anymore: if you have a humidity problem, move to the

desert: burn the insides of your head out: want
to get away from pollution, but there's no nearest hospital:
try southern California, look out for the rattlesnakes:

Florida, hurricanes: Vermont, timothy in August and
the winter dreadful: well, well: it looks as if
paradise was built elsewhere: find a nice island, it's

waterless and fifty minutes by launch to the mainland:
had a lot of aggravation: contradictions going by in
arpeggios, obbligatos, cadenzas, droves: listen

to the swarm: but I don't care; I still know to
a hair what my desire is: contrarities, swift and
heavy confluences, "whole" situations good and bad:

get a little crust: the defenseless are so generous
and kind: paint your mean streak: nothing banishes
fear like meanness: just a touch: a little whatfor:

aggressive is a nice adjective for up-and-coming young
men: but the noun is a little heartless: aggressive
means resistant to wilting and withering under trying

conditions: means willing to figure out ways to prevent
failure: means right in there: (get your poetical
omnibus of cozy statements and friendly feelings,

several dollars and nothing taxing): what animals
we are, Men Stinking: we can't fix our attention on
ourselves and stay sober: fellow in his big car

yesterday, drove up to the intersection and, bloop,
emptied his ashtray in the middle of the street: well,
if one cannot improve things, one must improve one's

view of things: but one must keep the improvement
slight, so one's views will not get too filthy with reality:
if one announced a deep or high improvement one would be

classified: though trash collector (lingo, junk talk,
street bitch) somewhat extraordinaire (I deal in pretty
high-level stuff) (I mean there are a lot of streets

I haven't been in) I don't make much of a good job
of it, nothing thorough or scientific, I just wallow
around like a caddis fly larva and let any loose

bit stick to me and my glue-like interest: I was
brought up on "I ain't got nary'un" instead of "I
don't have one:" but I (do) don't deal with lingo in

its fresh, dough-like origins but in its cast-offs,
worn-outs, stiff-and-thins, the used-up literary:
I like that because who would want to fool around

with anything live: just when words, all glare and
no energy, are cascading out of vital curvatures, I
go about and pick them up (seine them out) tinny

mementos: go to the ocean always at the same time, the
ocean will always be different: I used to think there
was something ahead of me, but now I think there is

nothing behind me: the noise level here is bel canto:
several children yelling, crying, agreeing and
disagreeing: a dull plane burring: the dog across

the street yapping furiously: cars burning through
the air, splitting, the tires thubbing the cracks in
the concrete: the record-player of the boy-house right

behind us at record level: cars rodding off from the
intersection or screeching off or screeching to a stop:
dishes rattling: water frying through the pipes: the

typewriter clacking: that's some of it at the moment:
it subsides, it rises, but it never goes away: Edison
was half-lucky when he got his ears pulled and couldn't

half hear thereafter: now, a man is yelling, hey, hey,
and a big-truck's motor has started: the dog is at
his high-excitement level, yipping: Royall Drive in

Winston-Salem was so quiet by comparison, maybe a car
an hour, the dogs loose, at least (unleashed) and nosing
quiet: Hanshaw, too, is better than this: anything is:

pile on that the stagnant, humid air, rated "unhealthy"
and the hanging cloudcover, two days old and scheduled
to hold: there are a number of other conditions

that promise no improvement: I wonder how people get
by and what they could want enough to give them the
strength to get by: whatever it is, I must be missing it:

this was supposed to be Judge the Fucking Photography
Contest Day but the rains, by the beautiful sea,
continued, and it was deemed better not to show one's

photos than to get them rainacid etched: so I made it Get
the Fucking Car Serviced Day and Try to Figure out
Why the Fucking Accelerator Sticks: the importance

of a bright spot has not been grossly exaggerated:
there at the service station were the verbal
artifacts hanging on the wall, the appropriate

summation or penates of the place: "I know that you
believe you understand what you think I said but
I am not sure you realize that what you heard is not

what I meant:" or "We're too lazy to work and too
nervous to steal," (that's a literary steal) or, "As you
slide down the banister, etc. splinters the wrong, etc."

or, "Labor Charges—Per hour, \$10.00; If you watch,
\$12.50; If you help, \$15.00; If you do the job,
\$20.00:" this has not been a good year for summers:

as long as I can lay my hand to it, I will try to
assuage the problem: live living it up down: shake
a tower (take a shower): as we were driving to the mainland

this afternoon, the accelerator kept sticking at fifty while
I was braking and shifting into neutral and roaring:
how scary! an unturnoffable car! unslowdownable!

but then when we got to Mary's, Bob fixed it for me:
greased the works, put the return spring in a tighter
notch: there was so much Saturday traffic, stacked up,

I couldn't imagine how I'd get back over the bridge:
we came home via the toll, Longport Bridge: how sweet
it was, to be in charge of idling, though the bridge opened:

the weather's so rainy and stormy you can't get your
astronauts up: birds can't fly dry: worms are out of
their holes: the cookies are bewithered with dew:

the towels are sticky, sour, and repulsive: every
dainty pussy's indoors: this is Aren't There a Lot of
Those Fucking Little Raindrops Today Day (7-13):

if I touch your balls, you will never forget me: if
I nip your clit, I will forever appear as an imagination
in your thoughts: if I only touch the fringe of the

hairy aura around your balls, so they shrink and,
crinkling, cringe, a ghostly spook will be on you,
haunting: or if I describe with the lightness of

a mind's lineation the expanded folding labia of
your whompus, you will bear forever the start of a
nearly actual surprise: if I mark you with a touchous

incision in your tenderest parts, and meanwhile hold
you with my probing eyes, you will never give my
presence up, a dwelling about you: you will wonder

& dream: you will search my lines for my line: in
 your deepest moment with another, I will appear and,
 possessing you, shoo your over the hills, the agony

and the glide: but since I don't need to ravish
 more than a million, don't take it too seriously:
 skirmishes: splinters: after a while, depression depresses:

one morning you see on a bright concrete
 corner a stack of dog-do and you think, that must
 be quite a pooch, but the sun bakes it and the next

morning the pooch seems smaller until one morning the
 do is so tight, dry, and trivial the pooch is a poodle:
 sum & tendency: (7-19): the prettiest day invited

thousands of shoobies to come to the beach, every
 parking place car-solid, but early afternoon has
 turned cloudy, windy, cooler, few raindrops, and the

shoobies are packing up their boxes, beach chairs,
 umbrellas, etc. and heading back for the mainland:
 "that's the way it goes" is the cheerful summary:

have fun: what, you mean toss the cares and worries
 like a beachball, the way the cares and worries toss
 us like a beachball! the very idea of having fun!

try to imagine it, just dropping the fears and severe
 entertainments and letting the self sing with loss of
 caution! sing into something like the delightful

terror of the salt-and-pepper shaker, scrambler or
 tilt-a-whirl: what security, to be able to taunt
 terror: what a stability that hungers for disaster,

inferno, earthquake as no more than a sweet unsettling
 while I, contrariwise, shaking dream on sweet ease:
 oh for a security that thinks in years: oh for rock

underfoot: well, that is my pitiful, self-pitying
problem: I will spare you the details: or any
realization of languishing anguish: just remember

with air-conditioned cars the unnatural air can make
you think unnaturally: if you have a dog or baby in
the car, you must remember if you leave the car to roll

down the windows and let the warm air in: for the
closed windows that protected your coolness will hold
heat when the cooler stops: think unnaturally right:

disaster is natural: look at my face: some concession
to gravity: I knew this lady: she did everything for
her husband: she did everything for her children:

she said, sit down to the table: she had the most
beautiful voice, I mean as to tone and range and before
breakfast cooking stuff up: now, she bubbles belching

in terror and can't keep her tongue in: I can't stand
pretty beauty anymore: I can't stand any beauty that
doesn't sit and think her the most beautiful person

living: disaster is natural: I saw the legless
ward at the VA lots of times, diabetes gangrene
amputations, old boys: each carried a bottle of urine

under his wheelchair with a tube: like gas for the
motor: and just about everyone slouched over and
slept as deep as possible: there was the young

veteran, though: he burned up the halls, and
shot the corners on one wheel: he had it down to
nothing how much breeze he could make of speed: oh,

the loft is high and rid of such: up in the sways,
nobody is holding on to keep from falling out of his
bed: farther along we'll understand why: it is not,

finally, perhaps, ingratitude: it is not, finally,
not celebration: it is that we do not understand,
now: it is that we cannot see beauty all the way

through: it is that we think we would be justified
in wanting it another way, permanent joy: a land
imagined where love would never be pulled away from

love: where mothers and fathers would know beatitude
and touch us with their unconditioned smiles: where
tenderness would be so high it would transmit

light: and love of lovers would be a continual
music, reconciliations like breeze music: the rivers would
be flowing light and trees would sway with the fruit of

light: we do not understand why a place like this
would yield out no design: then, should our beauty
be the dream of the place and have nothing to do with

actual fellows: or should our beauty find itself
somehow perfect in the harelip, the crazy fascination
of cross-eyes or in the wild song of the cancer-mad:

our beauty, our beauty: on what shoal or shelf, ledge
or cloud will it lie down, dwelling beyond rust and moth,
so beyond it will know the worm and have no cognizance

thereof: the famous don't care for change, except
the change that nudges them to greater fame: you can beat
up on the ocean but not beat it up: you can beat it

up a little, you can splash or scrinch it: low tide
exposes the flank of the jetty, four strata to view:
lowest, black mussels: next, barnacles: next, seaweed:

then, sun country, naked: though the strata are
discernible, they are not insistent: here and there
barnacles lock under a boulder higher than seaweed:

and here and there seaweed clumps right down into the
barnacle bed: orders that permit variety (and adjustment)
are sort of casual, optimum dispositions: exactly the

way my poem is or means to be: sometimes a life has so
much thrust and verve, it has to be killed back and
back, until killing back becomes a way of doing things,

and then the verve becomes so great only killing ends
it: so, depression is often the sign of too much life,
but not coming through: the withering is the "show"

that holds life in: when it is a life one thinks should
not come through, then it is terribly troublesome, and
one must find ways, bowling or pooling, that will let

enough thru to keep the rest in: then, depression can
be increased by the knowledge of life lost: it is not
a tangle susceptible to easy untangling, but the most

reliable, partial untangling is to do something physical:
do not languish, weakening with the loss and holding in:
getting something out, even if not in the form it desired

release in, will often permit the grip to ease and the
flow, a slow flow, to move: Abby knows a lot but I
doubt she knows much about this: consult your physician:

I say do something physical even when I know that is
absolutely the hardest thing to do: but force yourself:
make a daily schedule, or weekly, that includes several

things, walks, showers, hangings-loose, hair combings,
nail cleanings, and then into all the other things:
showers are excellent because depressed people let

themselves get dirty and that depresses them: even if
you get a snuffle or two, even a cold, at first, begin
a regime of showers: touch yourself here and there

afterwards with a dab of powder or cologne: strike a figure or two before the mirror: the tension will sometimes erase wrinkles or re-arrange them: I met

a man this year who has suffered from the sharp pains of gas for ten years, and he didn't know what I told him, that you can take a single swallow of water

and dislodge the bubble enough to stop the pain: that was good news to him, something I discovered: but, of course, the water doesn't get rid of the bubble: I've

found that walking about a bit will sometimes loosen the bind enough to free the bubble: also, slowly twisting the body from side to side will sometimes bring

relief: if you've never experienced that uncomfortable tightness with the splinters of pain, you won't realize how important this message is: tuck it away in the

wrinkles, grooves, or furrows of your ready remedies: the message, not the tightness: I'm really interested in you: I mean I think I'm more interested in you than

you are in me: maybe I'm interested in you because I want you to be interested in me: or maybe I'm just interested in having you think of me as someone

interested in you: though I've never met you, I'll say this, my interest in you is no vaguer than my knowledge of you: featherless biped, naked ape: one of us: all

the gulls with nothing chasing the gull with something: a likely story: a review came today (which is, by the way, 7-21) that said I fall far short of Stevens: I

guess that means you couldn't hang your hat on mine: I never tried to fall far long of him: I have great respect for Mr. Stevens, but he is not as sobering as

the ocean: after watching two hours of Flintstones, its
unwackyng to get right down to the surf and see it
rolling and busting in: there are so many actions and

yet they are so simple and similar: the actions do not
resist the intelligence (poems do), in fact, declare
themselves openly in big summary waves: it's not hard

to tell what is happening, though it is of course quite
past calculation: other men are my man: I don't like
fancy colors or big cigars: I like loudmouths that

pretend to care for the people: I don't care for the
people much: I don't know many of them: but I mean to
care for the people: I really am fond of all the

minorities, except the rich: I have sympathy even for
them: they are deprived of the right to earn a living:
they know people see them as rich, not as people proper.

MARY ANN MALINCHAK RISHEL

Staus

MARTHA died on a Friday, in his arms. She just walked over to him and said she thought she had the flu and he held her and then she died. No pain, no fear. Like it was nothing. For her.

After that Staus didn't know how he should act. At the funeral he wanted to cry harder, but of all his brothers, he was the oldest and strongest so he had to act right. And he didn't know how to thank the people because Martha always did the thanking and he just didn't know how to say it, so he stood there, awkward, his hands folded below his stomach, nodding his head at the people who passed. Later at the Firehall, where they all went afterwards for coffee and something to eat, he kept staring at the firetruck, red and silver, in the middle of the room, at the light from the fenders, and the steel bars, at the black wheels with their zigzagged heights and hollows, and he said he was sorry they had to sit on the truck to find a place to eat.

Kate said don't worry, that nobody cares, but some of the people gave them mean looks that they had to eat and not sit right.

And then saying goodbye to Father Matey, not staying long, him being Irish and them Slovak, everybody stopping talking until he left.

After that, Staus went to the center of the men. Hose nozzles, sticking out, drooped towards the floor. Heavy black boots, toes pointing in all directions. The long line of table against the back wall. And people eating and laughing and watching him, and the bright bouquets of food clustered around the room, an edge of the paper tablecloth torn off, and the kids throwing it at each other, playing spud and rubbing it over their noses, making masks of their play. People with powdered sugar over their lips and teeth who handed him money and said they didn't know what else to do.

Everything was too scattered and he couldn't stay looking at any one thing. And the red firetruck in the center of the room.

Because of the war they married late—both were past forty. When he was drafted, he was already thirty-two and fought in every campaign across Africa and up the boot.

“Her hair turned grey at nineteen. And she was never ashamed of it. Always kept it grey.”

And after the war they dated and he wanted her to marry him right away, but things take long to get settled and so it was a while before they decided. A good hunkie wedding. Plenty of kielbasa, halusky zos kapusta, bobalky, pirohe, nut rolls, whiskey. They had been married twenty years.

“He can still find another wife. It would be a good thing.”

Staus used to spend a lot of time fixing his car before the war and when he and Martha got married and moved into her mother’s house that she inherited, he practically rebuilt the whole thing, tearing out a wall to make the parlor bigger, making round arches instead of square for the doorways, putting in a bathroom, laying down wider sewer pipes. He redid the outside, too, piling up a high bank from the road and sodding it. He taught himself a lot about fixing things and he was good at it.

And since Kate and Irene were widows, he used to put in or take out their storm windows or work on their toasters and the kids of his sisters would come and ask him to fix their houses since they weren’t as good as he was, so he was busy and even his three brothers would come and ask. Only his sister Marcie didn’t ask because she had a husband who could do for himself so Staus didn’t go much there.

Sometimes Martha used to yell that he was spending too much time doing other people’s work and what about his wife, so then the family would call a regular worker to take care of things and Staus and Martha would go to a drive-in movie or something. But nobody ever got mad because they knew Martha was right.

“Wife comes before family.”

The first few days after the funeral were busy and Staus ate and slept wherever he was at the moment, but after the Wilkes-Barre people went home, and the ones from Clairton, and Monessen, he didn’t know where to go so when his sister Kate called him and said to come and eat, he walked the twenty-five yards down the hill from his home to hers and they had supper and she said don’t worry because I’ll cook for you and you can sell your house and come and live with me. He said no, his house belonged once to Martha’s folks and he wouldn’t sell it and he knew how to clean it—but he’d come to her house to eat.

Two weeks after the funeral he took an early retirement. He was

getting too old to lift meat onto trucks, he thought, and working turns wasn't worth it. He decided he would just like to live evenly, getting up in the morning and going to bed at night.

The first morning after he quit his job, he got up early and cried for a while then Kate called him to come to breakfast so he went and his sister Irene was there too and they talked too loud and talked about the funeral and he was glad he went even though they gave him a headache and he drank too much coffee.

Later that day he fixed a television antenna on Yancey's roof because Yancey, the baby, never learned how to do a thing around the house and then he went home and slept until Kate called him and told him it was time again for supper.

His sister Irene came over again, although she always said she wasn't going to because it was too noisy, she came and stayed and they argued about which neighbor paid for the stuffed cabbage at the funeral. Kate was sure it was Mary Novak but Irene said that Mary Novak never did a thing for them, all she cared about was working and making a lot of money, and it was probably Joe Kobelnicki, who always helped them out ever since she used to clean for him.

Staus said he'd check his bills, that he thought it was charged to him, but he didn't care as long as everybody had plenty to eat. He had to see Andy about the coffin anyway.

"You'd better check, Staus. He can cheat you, you know. You have to think about those things."

And that's the way it went. Kate would cook for Staus and Irene would always come to sit and watch them eat and they would talk about the price of tomato soup and the best way to drill a hole in a wall to hang a picture and somehow Irene always got things mixed up and Staus would finish eating and go home tired.

Sometimes he would wonder how he had spent his time when Martha was alive and what it was like to have a quiet afternoon when they used to watch the football games—even though she didn't understand the forms—and when he used to come home from work and she would tell him the afternoon story so far.

And since Kate did the cooking for him, it was only right that he should buy the food and each Saturday he and Irene would go shopping, sometimes to four or five different stores to use up all the coupons. Kate didn't like to leave the house much. It was a lot of trouble to get dressed because she couldn't reach around to her

back to zipper her dresses and Irene wouldn't help her because she said that Kate should grow up being 67 years old, and learn to dress herself—she always had her daughters dress her when they were still at home—so Kate didn't go and Staus and Irene would shop and compare prices and go from one end of town to the other to get the best bargains and check the sales.

And because Staus wanted to buy the best food, and a lot of it, so that Kate wouldn't think he was cheap, it cost Staus money, and Kate tried to cook it all so that Staus wouldn't think she was cheating him and because it helped slow her embarrassment at having a man in the house again.

And in Monessen Irene's dead husband's sister, Sara, wondered how Staus was.

"Staus, you're goin't need more dirt for the grave pretty soon. It's about time for it to sink again." Irene sat hunched in her corner at Kate's kitchen, squeezed against the wall that divided the cellar steps from the door that led to the outside. The afghan she was crocheting for the kids hung over the edge of the table. "And those flowers you put on it keep dying. Maybe you should get some ivy or some kind of fern."

"I'll take a look at it."

"Just plain grass with some sort of outline for the grave is nice, too."

Staus moved closer against his wall to make room for Kate who blocked his chair as she reached across the table for the bread. Kate's hands kept going numb on her and she tapped her fingers against the table to bring back the feeling. She worked hard for him, he knew, and it took her a long time to do things.

"We're goin't have to cut the grass on Bubba's and Zedos' graves, too," said Kate.

Staus saw that the door on the left cupboard didn't close all the way. The kids slam doors and then make the hooks bent, he thought. Maybe he could straighten it out without taking the whole lock apart.

"Well, I just can't do them, Kate. I have to take care of Joe's. Somebody else'll have to do it. I can't do everybody's. You don't go up there so you don't know how much work there is."

"Don't worry, Irene. Staus'll cut the grass. You'll just have to dig around."

"Well, I'll dig, but I'm not doin' the heavy work."

Staus stood up. He could see shades of red behind the darkness of the uneven cupboard door. He stepped over Kate's feet as he left the room. It felt good to stretch.

"They just made a new grave for Johnnie Pozzo's son. Only 35," said Kate.

"Where's it at?"

Irene's voice carried through him as he tried to think above their sounds. He could see her stretch out her bad leg, her foot wrapped in a crushed bedroom slipper.

"Across from Minski—you know, catty corner from Rahovichiks—down about four plots."

"That's kind of swampy."

"Well, the cemetery's getting crowded. Everybody wants to be buried in it and there's no place left."

Staus picked up the paper and sat in the chair by the picture window. He could see all the way down the hill to Roozie's new house on the edge of the dump, past the Christy Park Bridge over to Kelsey Hayes. Back up over the hill, closer towards Ridge Vue stood the old schoolhouse with its three-story fire escape winding right up to the belfrey window. And on the second floor, in the two small front rooms was the borough office where Martha worked as the water clerk before they were married.

He could hear Irene counting to herself as she tore out some stitches from the afghan. "They should go to the American one in Versailles. They don't have to be buried in the Slovak one. It's just for people from Holy Trinity. Everybody wants to steal our cemetery property."

Martha was the best water clerk Ridge Vue ever had.

Irene counted. "Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen . . . and, if they wanted to be buried there, they're just goin't have to be buried in the swampy area. They'll just have to have a sinking grave, that's all."

The next month Sara from Monessen called to see how Irene's phlebitis was. They talked for a minute about Staus. Irene said that he was getting along pretty good and he gave a lot for Masses for Martha but that he kept busy. Sara said that things were slow at Irwin Works and that she was taking up beautician work. She would get her certificate soon. Yes, she was dating somebody, a nice fellow from Buena Vista who came up to see her sometimes, but she wouldn't like to live in his town. She said everybody from

Monessen would try to come up soon, probably when the weather got cooler, and she hoped Staus was O.K.

The days were slow ones for Staus. He went to Mass on First Friday, then cancelled out of going to a Pirates' baseball game with the Senior Citizens. He didn't like to go out much anymore and, besides, it was mostly women who went. The following Sunday he went over to Betty Ann's and played with her kids for a while then they talked about how to put a patio in. That night he ate out at Pete's Boxcar. Kate didn't feel good—her blood pressure again—and it was too hot to cook. Irene was over at her kids.

Monday he got up early and cut the grass. After showering, he went up to see Martha's sister, Liz. They talked about the funeral and both of them cried. Going back home, he found himself driving past the cemetery. He knew he should check Martha's grave again, but today he wasn't ready. It seemed that somehow her death just didn't want to settle into him.

The next day he took Irene shopping. They went to Loblaws for the meat sale, then to Old Lady Roma's for vegetables. Afterwards, Staus carried everything into Kate's place where she would sort out their food.

It was hot and he had a headache and his body moved slower than it used to.

"I think my awning is goin' to need painted pretty soon. It's rusty underneath and you have to look at it when you sit."

Irene sat down by the kitchen table and began sipping coffee from a white mug that Kate handed her. Staus went into the parlor to read the paper; Kate began putting away the food.

"Ask Staus to fix it, if you want. My awning is pretty bad, too, but I don't complain." There was no room in the refrigerator for the milk and she was tugging at a rack, trying to pull it out without taking off all the food.

"Kate, I'm not complaining. I just said it was goin' bad." Irene took a mouthful of coffee. "I don't have to ask Staus to fix it. I can do it myself."

"Don't be silly. You can't do it yourself. How you gonna take it down. It's ten times heavier than you."

Staus shook the paper, hoping the noise would put some energy into the hot room. Irene pushed her cup to the edge of the table and Kate dropped it into the dishwasher.

"I can do it. I've done heavier work than that. I had to. When my

husband died, I had to learn how to do everything. Nobody helped me then."

Kate shifted the food rack down two notches then put two jars of hot peppers inside the refrigerator door. Dried pickle juice coated the bars of the rack and a sour cumin-seed odor covered the room.

"You can't lift that awning down. Staus will do it for you."

"No, I'm not asking him to do nothin' for me. If he wants to, he can, but I'm not asking."

Staus got up from the chair. He could finish the paper at his house. It was late, anyway.

"I'll take a look at your awning next week, Irene. I still have to finish the cupboard for Yancey."

Kate closed the refrigerator door. "You don't have to hurry, Staus. You've got plenty of work to do. Irene's awnings ain't that bad. It can wait. My awning's bad, too, but I don't let it get to me."

Staus felt his breathing get heavy. A roll of fat hung below his chest and he couldn't get used to the idea that it belonged to him. It doesn't take long for an old man's belt to feel tight.

"It can't wait, Kate. My awning's worser than yours. How do you know how bad mine is? Do you ever come over to see? No, you don't."

"Irene, I was just over your house a couple of days ago. Sunday."

"Yeah, to get one of my good recipes. For five minutes. But you don't come over to visit."

"I came to visit Tuesday."

"Kate, you wasn't over Tuesday. I was in town Tuesday."

Staus walked out. Irene's would be a job because he would have to take it off the poles to get at all the rust spots. Kate's was newer so he would just have to give it one coat. But they would both take time and he wanted to paint the trim on his house, too, before the cold weather set in.

He should do Kate's first. It was easier and besides, she cooked for him. He didn't want her to think he didn't like her cooking. Her food was okay, if just she didn't talk so much when they ate. He liked it quiet.

It rained all that week and then it got hot again, August hot, and the mills let out their sulfur smoke so that a settled orange mist groped among the Ridge Vue houses and made his chest heavy.

When he began to put an undercoating on Kate's roof, he noticed that the steel was more rusted than he thought and he had to call

Zeppi to help him. They worked two days and since it was a high porch, it took him a long time because he kept getting dizzy and his neck hurt from bending his head back so much.

When it was done, Kate said thanks a lot and he went home tired. Later she woke him and told him to come to dinner.

The next two days he had to fix his car and he promised himself that he would do Irene's awnings next week for sure. The rest of that week was so nice he went swimming every day, by himself, where it was quiet and where he and Martha would go every Sunday when she was alive. He liked to fall back onto the water and let it cover him, pretending that she was sitting there on the side, watching him. Martha didn't know how to swim.

Monday of the next week, for some reason, he decided it was time to check on Martha's grave. Mostly nothing new happened inside him, but it was just that he knew he had to finish things, to show himself that what had come about was so.

He was a little late because he slept in, but he figured that he could be at the cemetery by nine. He called Kate, said that he wasn't going for breakfast and that Irene shouldn't come with him since he wouldn't be long. Then he put the fresh dirt, bricks, tools, and an old bag of lime he was storing in the cellar into the trunk of his car.

There was a lot between them. Martha had always known that, too.

He drove the two miles down Myer Avenue, past Olie's, the mailman, and Olie's retarded sister's house, onto the dirt road that led to the cemetery and the old iron gate. The gate was still locked but you could get in by squeezing through a split in the wall near where the stone arch over the entrance said, "Calvary." He got himself through, then unlatched the splintered wooden bar. Old Man Vosak was getting old. He kept forgetting to open up the place.

After stopping for water, Staus drove his car past the gates and down the narrow road to the bottom of the hill below the main crucifix. The air was clean from the rain and the sky a pale blue, about as blue as it ever got in Ridge Vue except for one or two days a year, mostly in winter.

The grave was on the side of a slope, an irregular rocky section of land with hard clusters of pig leaves growing in pale, almost white,

soil. He should have tried to get a better plot, he thought, maybe down by the chapel, or up at the top, but Andy said this was a good one and the funeral was so fast. He stuffed his pockets with the hand tools, then carried the first bushel of dirt up the two hills, slowly, stopping often, breathing hard.

Everything had sunk again from the rains, and the uneven mud falling over the grave boundary made a twisted outline. He focused his eyes to see what the grave would look like when he brought up the extra dirt and began raking the top soil of the grave even. This grave would always sink sideways, being on the side of the hill. Nothing he could do about it. In some places the grass was overgrown and in others nothing but bare spots marked where they all had stood that day she was buried.

Martha.

He hurried back down to the car to get more dirt. It was good rich soil that he held, and it left its dark trail from the car to the grave as it seeped out of the sides of the bushel and onto his shoes. Returning, he said a Hail Mary, then started to work, trying not to think of her underneath his feet, dead.

He was getting old, he thought, as he pushed the grass cutter over the plot and felt it stick against the stones, a jam against his chest. These were extra rocks that had come down from the top of the hill from the last rain. He stopped to clean the blades of the broken grass and dirt, aware that he had eaten too much yesterday and his movements were slow.

He scraped around the grave's edges to remake the outlines, sometimes bringing up traces of white sand and pebbles, and poured the dirt inside of his design. No High Mass. Father Matey said he should say it the same as for all the others, as there'd be hard feelings that he was doing something special. First pew, aisle. Communion. The dry host bearing down on the pain of his throat. Just watching little Stumpy Meskovak hold the yellow candle slanty, the flame shake through the air. And a lid down over her. . . . He sprayed some water on the grave to firm and shape the mound and etched it into a rectangle. Returning to the car, he loaded the bushel with the bricks. They were actually half bricks he got at cost from Unger's Construction, because somebody didn't bake them right. But they were what he wanted. The regular bricks were too big.

He again climbed the two hills to her grave. The day was getting warmer and he wanted to take off his shirt, but he thought it wouldn't be respectful in a cemetery. Kneeling down slowly, he rubbed his hands along the soft soil, allowing himself to feel only the slightest touch against his palms. He set the bricks one by one, around the grave, even in size except for four slightly larger ones at each point of the four corners.

In the center of the grave he placed the last four bricks in the shape of a cross, then he took a whisk broom and brushed each one carefully so that no dirt would hide the whitewash. He checked the design twice. Everything was even.

You could see that grave, he thought, even when you're still inside your car, driving up the road.

It looked good. It was a shame that Casey didn't come to her funeral after all she did for his kids. And that black and white striped dress that hit her behind the knees so nice. Her finger tips touching her head, gently pressing against where it hurt . . .

He should dig around the headstone a little, too. He looked up at the sky. It was about 11:00, he figured. Someone was working around Sopanski's grave. Looked like the old lady's daughter, but somebody else was with her. He didn't know who. His eyes continued beyond the two hills towards the old chapel with the broken windows where his mother and all the women from the old country used to come to say the rosary every Wednesday.

And beyond that, along the road, he saw a stooped figure moving quickly, someone in a pink dress.

He straightened up his back. It ached inside his shoulders and along his waist. He could remember Martha's laugh—a loud giggle that everybody teased her about and the way she turned her head to the side. They liked being married.

He ran his hand along the dry spots in the grass. They felt harsh against his fingers when he touched them—unlike the velvet soil on the grave. He reached for the bag of lime and sprinkled it wherever the grass was weak or sparse. Everything looked strange—all decorated with the white streaks scattered through the grass contrasting with the ordered white of the bricks, tight in their firm rectangle.

As he stood there, rubbing his back, he looked down the road again. The hunched figure was moving closer, the arms pushing against the air, looking up at him. His eyes were getting bad. He couldn't see who it was. Somebody was in a hurry.

He stared. The woman seemed to be going to Sopanski's grave.

He watched for a few minutes more and, as he thought, the woman stopped and began gesturing to the two women who came to the side of the road to meet her. Staus bent down and began clipping the sharp grasses at the end of the plot. Maybe if he got all the trim done, everything would look better. He and Irene could bring up fresh flowers next week.

He snipped each leaf sharp, a sense of exactness falling through him as he tried to make the cut level with the others. When he reached the tombstone, he stopped to look at it close.

Martha.

The blue-grey veins of its marble twisted through her name.

“Staus!”

Suddenly he was jarred back to where he was. He lifted himself up and some of the ache in his muscles went away. Then he saw. Gown at the bottom of the two hills—it was Kate.

He stood and watched her walk up the first hill before he realized that he should go to meet her.

“Irene’s taking down her awning herself.”

Staus swore, then dumped all the tools into the bushels. He carried the heaviest one to the car and Kate dragged the two others behind her. When they got back to Romine Avenue, Irene was out in the yard in a striped housedress and a pair of bedroom slippers.

“What the hell you doin’? You can’t do that awning.”

Irene had three large pieces of it on the ground and she leaned over a can of paint, her body bent.

“I can’t wait all year to paint this. I want to sit on my porch before winter sets in.”

“I told you I’d do it.”

He watched her tear at the aluminum, moving it into sections around the yard. Sixty-four years old but strong. Her heavy body swayed as she lifted a steel bar, her wrapped leg shaking with the weight.

“Never you mind. I want to get it done.”

Staus could feel the heat rush through his arms and face. He wished he had done her awning first. Kate would have waited. He would do a good job if she would wait for him to get in the mood.

“Here, give me that. The trouble with you, Irene, is that you’re too damn independent. You’re goin’ to kill yourself yet.”

"Don't think, Staus, that you have to do things for me. You ain't my husband. You're not obliged."

"Irene, just shut up and let me handle that." Staus carried the two slats into the shade.

"I don't want you to have to drag yourself to my house to do things."

"I don't drag myself. It's just sometimes I have things to do for myself."

He turned on the electric sander and ran it over the rusty underside of the awning strips. Irene was standing there, watching him hard, too mad to do anything. He knew she didn't want him finishing her work now, being stubborn like she was. But he sanded and she watched from the steps of the porch.

"Staus, you're getting awful grouchy. We don't ask for too much—one or two times a year we ask. Mostly, we let you do what you want." Irene put her hands under her apron. "Who knows. Maybe you're tired of us. Maybe you should live your own life."

Staus pried up the lid of a paint can, smearing green over his fingers. He saw her walk around the yard slow, favoring her weak leg, filling up two buckets with paint brushes and rags she found scattered over the grass. She wasn't a bad woman. Martha always liked her. She was poor but she always thought of her kids. Martha used to say that they were always better dressed than Kate's kids and Kate had three sons and a husband working.

"I just want to do what I'm doin'."

Irene walked closer, lowering her voice to a whisper. "In Monessen, Sara Antonszik." She waited for a truck to pass. "She's a nice girl. Single all these years. She's a good cook, too."

Staus turned and stared full into her face. "Irene—why you mentioning her?" He saw that she got scared but he didn't want to be bothered with things like that. Irene became quiet. She walked back to the porch and sat on a step, her legs stretched out before her, crossed at the ankles, her arms resting against her lap. He could feel her watching him.

"Staus. I wasn't saying nothin'. I was just talkin'."

When Staus was done, Irene said thanks but you didn't have to because I could have finished it myself and do you want something to eat. Staus said O.K. and they sat there, drinking coffee, Irene's silence hovering over the clinks and thuds of the cups against the table. Irene swallowed hard, her eyes looking at the stove. Finally,

Staus got up and said he was going home and the hill was a heavy climb this time.

Staus didn't say anything to Kate the next day when he went for breakfast, but she knew Staus and Irene had fought and later that afternoon she went across the street to Irene's and asked her for a recipe. Irene told her that Staus doesn't do much for her and when the one time she asks him, it takes him a year to come and then he looks like he doesn't want to do it. Kate said that she, Irene, was always his and Martha's favorite and he didn't mean not to come. Irene gave Kate the recipe and went over for a cup of coffee the next day. Staus gave her a section of the newspaper he was reading and they talked a little, but didn't say much. When Irene was sitting on her porch the next day, Staus came over to see how the roof was holding up. Irene said it was a good job. And that was that.

Now for sure Irene didn't want to push the matter, but when Sara from Monessen called again and asked how things were, Irene wished that something really could happen between her and Staus since all the families wanted it to and, in a way, they were all a little disappointed that Staus married Martha instead of Sara. Not that none of them didn't like Martha. But Sara was already in the family, being the sister of Irene's husband Joe.

Anyway, they didn't even tell him that Sara called.

Then on Labor Day Sunday, the whole gang from Monessen came—Yush and Beatrice, Steve and Mary, their kids—and Sara.

Everybody sat around Irene's table and talked a lot and Mary had a corsage on that her only son George bought her and that everybody all thought was silly, especially Irene, but they said it was real pretty. And Beatrice told about her job at the Quick Fish Fry and how busy they were on Friday and how she hated it but what could she do since Yush lost his job at the Monessen mill and he didn't make much doing odd jobs. And Irene sat on the stairs behind Sara and wished she could do something for her. Staus was a stubborn man and they didn't know whether or not he would come over to say hello, even though it wouldn't be very nice if he didn't.

But he came, right before supper. Irene was cooking by the stove and Sara was sitting at the table telling how nice everything was. Staus looked overdressed, the ties of his shoes too tight, making his legs look swollen, his steps too small and dainty, the feet too centered underneath his chair.

“Staus, you wanna stay for supper? It’s fried chicken.”

“Nah, I just come over to say hello. Kate’s got supper for me over there.”

“How’s she doin’?”

“Ah—you know Kate—she don’t like to go no place.”

“Staus, you want a cup of coffee?”

“Yeah—I’ll take a cup of coffee.”

And Sara, her hands tucked into the folds of her orange dress, Staus not looking at her, the side of the refrigerator in front of him, not wanting to see the grey figure fading and forming itself again in the enamel. He followed Irene’s body as she moved across the room, serving coffee and cookies before the supper. His deep brown eyes over the people around him, going a little faster past the place where Sara set.

“Staus—we’re goin’ to eat pretty soon. You want to stay and eat?”

“No, Irene, I said. Kate’s over there waiting for me.”

Sara, who worked sorting tin during the war, her fingers shaking from the arthritis, searching for something to hold—an edge of the tablecloth, wrapping and unwrapping its edge around her fingers. Sara, the salt and pepper shakers circling each other in a dance of things.

And the kids began to slide on the linoleum and mark off the blue and yellow squares into good sections and bad ones and Irene told them over and over to go play in the other room, that they were making too much noise, but they didn’t listen and since they weren’t hers, she couldn’t say too much.

Then supper was ready and the first shift was ready to eat—all the kids and Sara—because she was in charge of feeding them. But the others wouldn’t move from the table so they still ate in two shifts, but with everybody seated at the table at once.

And Staus stayed until the first shift ate, then left to go back to Kate’s to eat with her.

After supper and the dishes were done, everybody except the kids walked across the street to say hello to Kate and then they all helped Staus carry old paint cans up to his house. The garbage man didn’t take stuff like that and he would have to drive it down to the dump the next day. Later they sat on Staus’ porch, looking out over the whole of Ridge Vue and the mills below them, the fire

coming from a smoke stack, and Staus asked them if they wanted a ginger ale or a beer.

The women took the ginger ale and the men the beer, and they all sat and watched Mrs. Povac empty her garbage and she had to walk it up the hill to the alley. Her house needed painting, too. It was still hot out and Staus put his feet on the banister to rest them.

“Not too many lights on in the hollow tonight.”

They watched the Hungarian refugee get into her car, sliding easily onto the vinyl seat. She was thin, not like the Slovak women, with short cropped hair.

“I heard Thelma Kinsky married a divorced man.”

“Ahy—she don’t know what she’s doin’. Just a smart alec, leaving the church like that. I heard his first wife threw him out.”

“Mrs. Sush put those iron bars in front of her house but there never was a car who run into them, was there?”

“No, once I think. Come right down the hill, slid on the ice and dented them. Boy, was she mad. Wanted the Boro Council to pay for straightening out the bend.”

And everybody stared over the banister at the town below them at the lights among the dark and the early night-shift of trucks going up and down.

Sara. Staus could feel her presence two people beyond him. Her head was resting against the front wall of the house, and he could smell her perfume, like sweet oil covering his skin. She had a quiet voice, not loud and playful like Martha’s and she was nice—but mostly Staus just wanted to talk to Yush and Steve about work in the mills and Sara’s being on his porch made him restless and he didn’t breathe the same as when he was with only his family.

Sara. He could see her brown shoe resting against the porch step, so balanced that the slightest move would make her foot fall off.

Then everybody from Monessen went home and Kate and Irene didn’t say anything.

The next day Staus invited Irene to go to the cemetery. They cut away weeds and dug up the dirt a little and Staus polished the tombstone. Irene had had a hard life, Staus thought, Joe dying so young, and it was good to see her old now, her kids raised, and nothing to worry about, just herself.

He watched her pile dirt on the grave, scraping it up from the washed out overflow, packing it tight, bending her whole body over the grave. Staus could feel her strength as she pounded the soil,

smoothed and scraped the dirt. Her grey hair curled in a bun, in places still blonde from her younger days. When they were kids, Staus thought, the two of them used to ride in the back of the firetruck on their way to Tunziebok's picnics. With the others and the kegs of beer. Kate was married then and didn't go, she married at eighteen, and Martha was still too young. Him and Irene, though. And their brothers Roozie and John. And the guys from Clairton and Duquesne, some as far away as New Kensington. The girls from Ridge Vue and McKeesport. Everybody came from all over for those picnics. Sometimes as much as fifty of them and then the firetruck had to make two trips for the ones who didn't have cars, and that was most of them. But it didn't matter. They got around.

And the time they took the firetruck to Altoona to surprise the guys up there—it was the old one then, the blue one—only Ridge Vue had a *blue* firetruck—and it broke down on Route 22 right by Rainbow Gardens—and they had to walk the twenty miles back to Ridge Vue, all of the guys singing, and it was two weeks before they could get someone to drive them back out there to fix it so they could drive it home.

And that's when Irene started dating Joe from Monessen only he didn't have a car either so she was right where she started with the Ridge Vue guys. But nobody cared except when Mike Orzslak showed up with his coupe and they would all fight to ride in the rumble seat waving at everybody during their turn around the block.

"How much longer you gonna be, Staus?"

Staus could see that Irene was tired already. She couldn't stay with any one thing long, he thought. He helped her to stand up, waiting to see that she caught her balance. She put on her sweater, resting before she slid her arms through the sleeves, then gathered the hand tools in her apron.

There was still a cool breeze on the hill, but by ten o'clock it would be hot. They had an hour. Staus felt like finishing.

Irene looked around to see that she had all her things—"You can stay more if you want, Staus, but I have other dead people I have to do for, too"—then left him standing on the side of the hill while she went to cut Joe's grass.

Afterwards they went over to Kate's to tell her what they did on the graves. She was baking cookies for her grandson's birthday—

they were having a party for him this Sunday, but only relatives. The kitchen was warm and she wanted to finish before the noon heat set in and her nerves got to her. Irene told them how John Supchak, the druggist, got pulled in for giving drugs without a doctor's okay, but he was just doing some old people a favor because how could they afford to always pay doctors just to tell them what pills to take and John knew what was wrong with them because he took care of all the people in Ridge Vue for years now. And Staus watched Kate put sprinkles over the sugar cookies. Bits of the glitter stuck to her fingers then flashed through the air as she rubbed her fingers together to release the flakes. She sprinkled sugar, then glitter.

"Kate, you should make different designs. Don't make them all the same." Irene sat down at the table.

Kate put a cherry in the center of some of the cookies with pieces of mint jelly candy around the edge. Irene took a few cookies and made star and snow flake designs with coconut.

Staus watched. Bits of color pushed into beige dough. Sugar tumbling over the edges of cookies onto torn waxpaper.

"Staus, you'll stay and eat some of these for dinner time," said Kate. She bent over and put a tray into the oven.

Irene gave Staus some of the dough and they began rolling the next group of cookies. Staus put nuts on his, Kate was mostly for chocolate chips and Irene worked with the colored bits of candy.

It was getting along to noon and they would be eating lunch soon. Staus was hungry today even though lately he didn't usually have much of an appetite. Afterwards they would sit on Kate's patio and it would be cooler outside and maybe later he would work on his car. He began rolling more dough into balls, but he wasn't as fast as Irene or Kate.

"Make as many different ones as you can," said Irene.

And for almost an hour they all sat around the table and watched the sugar drop from their hands.

PHILIP BOOTH

Here

There
is which way the wind blows
and how:
 with what strength
and fetch,
 but the choice is
in us
 we think whether
 to search
out into it,
 and, if we do, what
course to set:

 to beat into it,
the familiar
 semblance of achievement,
feeling
 sure
 resistance
to all
 we hope to make good;

or simply reaching
 across it,
the fastest possible passage;

that, or
 easing off all
 the way,
even
 with luck
 skill earns
the surest
 risk,

the closest to
rolling
out of control;

the choice is
not
in the cabin which barely
lends us shelter,
the choice is in us
in us:
what we have heart for,
to what we are equal:

the planet
long since gathered torque
pulsing
the wind this way:
as if
we could choose
as if
there were choice.

SYDNEY LEA

To the Summer Sweethearts

The easiness of August night:
a fall of meteors,
moths jewel my house

across the lane, I float
in the fire-pond, the light-
riffled fire-pond. Cattails puff
their buoyant seed. The tadpoles
have absorbed their tails:
they hum and pause and hum.

Innocent, I ask you in.

The egg-rich mayflies dip and rise,
dimple the surface, die.
The silver guppies sip them.

Come sit, at least, composite
(eyes of Margot, Susie's hair,
the even smile of Sarah),
there on the bank.
You've seen the evil-looking turtles,
but sweetheart they never bite.

There. There.
Let's have a look at you.

Listen to the Whip-Poor-Will,
Chuck Will's Widow,
Nightjar.

STEVEN HELMLING

Yeats's Esoteric Comedy

Death and life were not
Till man made up the whole,
Made lock, stock and barrel
Out of his bitter soul . . .

WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS WAS ACUTELY AWARE of the truth of Blake's proverb, that we become what we behold. The metaphors we invent to explain our world end by defining us, even if (perhaps especially if) we expressly deny "truth" to metaphor: Yeats came of age at a time when the utilitarian explanation of nature and the mind as mechanism was effectively transforming its proponents into a chorus of automata, reiterating as relentlessly as a broken record, the "fact" of the universe's resemblance to a machine. Yeats's poetry has been overtaken by a similar metaphorical automatism: its golden birds, its goldsmiths, its stones at the heart of it all, have been handily appropriated to vying fashions of regarding a poem not as an occasion for a voice to mediate between a subject and a hearer (or reader), but as an "artifact," having some sort of material substantiality; or as an "objective correlative," occupying a realm conceived as somehow spatial; or as a "verbal icon," a stylized assemblage, glazed and fired under great heat and pressure into an item of formidable specific gravity.

Yet Yeats is always at his most bitter when he thinks of himself or his work as stone; only when exhausted and despairing does he see himself as a marble triton among the streams. (A marble or a bronze repose, such as he elsewhere commends, is a property of images, not of the human heart that breaks contemplating them.) Yeats hated the sense of being turned into a monument, and expended great energy to keep his work in perpetual motion, in transit from golden bird to chestnut tree, dancer, beggar, saint, fool, hag, and the rest. Such Protean compendiousness, if we recognize its extent, mocks the efforts of commentators to domesticate it, to elicit from it orderly catalogues of themes and motives neatly arrayable in a handbook. Critics should reflect that the temptation

to elicit, even to extort, gratifyingly orderly meanings from difficult texts is one that Yeats experienced fully in a lifetime of turning the pages of queer old books. Indeed, the temptation to put such orderly meanings *into* his own poetry explains the narrowness of Yeats's verse until his thirty-seventh year, when he wrote "Adam's Curse." In an 1898 essay, "The Autumn of the Body," Yeats had advocated in solemn tones "A new poetry which is always contracting its limits": the deliberateness of that effort of contraction is matched only by its seriousness; and in "Adam's Curse," the shocking discovery that "meanings" are not always of the poet's choosing enforces a sudden and bitterly comic revaluation of bookish activity:

There have been lovers who thought love should be
So much compounded of high courtesy
That they would sigh and quote with learned looks
Precedents out of beautiful old books;
But now it seems an idle trade enough.

The deflation effected by that last line makes possible a kind of double vision, a recognition of the possibility, even of the inevitability, of submitting once cherished notions to the mockery and laughter of a new self. In the action of the poem, that harsh and bitter line erupts, before the speaker has considered its implications, into the stylized esthetic posturings of the lines that precede it. The deflation is instantaneous, and, what is more important, *permanent*: never again can those ninetyish gestures be indulged without a consciousness of their fatuity, of the evasions that inhere in their aspirations to a "high courtesy." A mask has been used up, consumed, exhausted; and since this process occurs so frequently in Yeats's poetry, we may take this instance as a paradigm of a uniquely Yeatsian comedy, a comedy of ironic self-discovery in which the play of contradiction and inconsistency come to have considerable exploratory value. This is why sustained attention to any reasonably longish sequence of poems so readily discerns contradictory statements of theme and attitude; and although these are probably never as programmatic as they can come to seem, they do evince an assured and deliberate gusto; like the cracks and discolorations in the piece of lapis lazuli in the poem of that title, they

are made an integral part of the design, welcomed as opportunities for the maker to display his artistry.

But strategic exploitation of these inconsistencies yields not only a comedy of discovery, but also a comedy of ambiguity, issuing from an awareness that "discovery" is never complete or final. Here, laughter and mockery, initially directed at the poet himself (his wryest pleasures come from skewing his own excessively schematic formulations), eventually furnish avenues of escape from the ossifications of all criticism and interpretation. Yeats tells us a number of times that his labor is "*written* speech"; and that adjective should remind us that Yeats's job was the patient contriving of *texts*. I have already mentioned Yeats's occult researches, and the ambiguity of oracular texts was certainly not lost on him; indeed, we find him very early on, and with great deliberateness, polishing small masterpieces of enigma and illusion. A poem like "Who Goes With Fergus?" begs every question patient analysis can ask, including the one the poem itself asks in its own title. Such calculated ambiguities are part and parcel of symbolism: as adumbrated in France, *symbolisme* meant the promotion of mysterious and elusive effects through the presentation of symbols whose referents were entirely suppressed; as introduced into England by Yeats's intimate friend, Arthur Symonds, symbolism referred itself to Carlyle's remark, quoted on the second page of *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, that "In a symbol, there is concealment, yet revelation."

A gnostic vagueness that can accommodate a great breadth of interpretive response: to some degree, it is in such vagueness that the continuing power of the Bible or the Kabala inheres. While a student of the occult, Yeats came to regard indistinctness as a virtue, as permitting the stylization, or reduction, of the particular to archetype. In his teens, he had spoken, following Pater and Ruskin, of the desirability of clear, firm outlines in art; but by the nineties, dimness, vagueness, faintness of outline had supplanted that clarity in his esthetic thinking. To both esthete and occultist, the art of the poker face is essential; and we can picture the young Yeats acquiring the rudiments in drawing rooms and at dinner tables, playing the Sensitive Plant to heartier men of sense, parrying their assaults with cryptic and imposing solemnity. Yeats's folklore researches are relevant here: imagine Lady Gregory and Yeats—the callow youth in pince-nez and velvet cravat who stares nervously from the Coburn photograph—materializing on some

remote Irish coast, making inquiries about the local faeries, ghosts, leprechauns, what have you? There is great art involved in uttering the preposterous without fear of contradiction, and Yeats's mastery only grew with time: in later years Sir Edmund Gosse and Gilbert Murray were to demur all but wordlessly on an occasion when Yeats imperiously confided to them that an acquaintance of his and theirs was being followed about by a small green elephant.

It is a validation of Yeats's instincts that in his esthetic phase, he never became ridiculous, as his friend Symons did. In a specifically nineties context, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* can be of use to us chiefly as a thesaurus of the unintentionally ludicrous: on every page we find Symons whispering in reverential tones, and *au très grand sérieux*, such things as this, about the sublime author of *Axel*: "he lived his faith, enduring what others called reality with contempt, whenever, for a moment, he became conscious of it." That a milieu existed, indeed, *thrived* on such twaddle as this underlines for us the ready availability of the handles of parody to writers like Joyce, Eliot, and Wyndham Lewis; it also goes far to explain the intemperances of Ezra Pound. But Yeats had partaken of that milieu; he was intensely loyal to friends ("old friends the most"); and, it may be, his financial roots were not readily transplantable. By the time Joyce spoofed Yeats in *Ulysses* ("Couldn't you do the Yeats touch?" inquires Buck Mulligan of Stephen: "'The most beautiful book to come out of our country in my time. One thinks of Homer.'"), Yeats had evolved his own way of exploiting the literary situation, by fabricating texts that gently satirize the nineties-grounded sensibility even as they gratify it. He does this as early as 1897 in a slim volume called *Rosa Alchemica*. In that book we hear a perfectly plausible young esthete expressing himself in the breathy confessional Paterian style then familiar; and this speaker is not readily distinguishable from the book's little known author William Butler Yeats, an obscure young dandy, poet, occultist, and (ahem) Irishman.

We may speculate that in London in 1897 the impact of *Rosa Alchemica* varied widely from reader to reader. At exactly what point would a given reader decide that he was reading fiction? To *épater le bourgeois* was ever one of the esthete's keenest (though grossest) pleasures; it is not impossible to imagine a reader proud of his healthy skepticism, and with a rational explanation for everything, reading all three stories (perhaps at the behest of his fiancée) and

supposing them to be a light-headed sensitive's crack-brained account of his more hallucinated meanderings around London.

But if such a gentleman would have to be a dunce, a much more attentive reader might be taken in by the annotation Yeats began to furnish to his volumes of poetry, in which those two wraiths from *Rosa Alchemica*, Robartes and Aherne, take on a spuriously convincing life. Reminders that they are fictional characters are dispensed with, and the two begin to emerge as Yeats's actual fellow students of the occult: their letters from points east are quoted, and sometimes adduced as "sources" for poems; their disputes over doctrinal minutiae are reported; the vicissitudes of their relations with Yeats himself are recounted. Within the domain of print, that is, they commence to commute freely between realms frankly fictional and realms speciously documentary.

This process reaches a comic culmination in the prefatory matter to the revised 1938 edition of *A Vision*. The amorphousness of such a term as "prefatory matter" is perfectly apt, for the pages that precede Yeats's account of his esoteric system offer us four very different kinds of writing which have the look of an extremely casual, even random, assemblage (an effect promoted, for example, by the word "Packet" under which three of the pieces are gathered). The pieces called "Rapallo" and "To Ezra Pound" are of the class of writing we would call ephemeral, or occasional; they have the look of having been included merely as a gesture of friendship, not because of any compelling connection between them and the book's larger subject. The farcical *Stories of Michael Robartes and his Friends* appears at first glance to be a bit of the purest whimsy. The "Introduction" appears to have been written, as it were, on the run, for differently dated sections refer to the main text as now in progress, now complete. Inspecting the typography of the table of contents, we find that these four pieces are subsumed under two heads: *A Packet For Ezra Pound* and *Stories of Michael Robartes and his Friends*; these two headings cover two different accounts of how the manuscript of *A Vision* came to exist in the first place, and of these two accounts, we are to understand that the first is the "true" one, if only because the other one is so extravagantly farcical.

The "true" account, in which Mrs. Yeats's mediumship is "revealed," is sandwiched between the two pieces addressed to Pound, a move that serves obliquely but forcefully to thrust what we are reading, spirit communicators and all, into the realm of documen-

table fact, where fellow poets visit each other in towns locatable on maps, and discuss with a candor for which the earnest reader is grateful, their very fascinating schemes of Art and Life. It is like the magician's yellow ball, on which we are to keep our eyes, as his other hand deftly manipulates rabbits and top hats: the spirit communicators, tucked in between the two addresses to Pound, partake of their ambience of the factual; yet we are getting, no doubt, a very crazy salad with our meat.

It should come as no surprise that the spirit communicators are proffered with plenty of documentary handles: we are given dates ("On the afternoon of October 24, 1917 . . ."); we are given places ("We were in a hotel on the edge of Ashdown Forest"); we are given all the circumstances attendant upon crucial junctures ("I was on a lecturing tour in America to earn a roof for Thoor Ballylee . . . We had one of those little sleeping compartments in a train, with two berths, and were somewhere in Southern California . . ."). These personal disclosures assure us that we are privileged to be in the poet's fullest confidence. The muted comedy that animates the entire account even promotes this sense of intimacy; spirits can't transpose themselves, after all, into the realm of restaurants and sleeping cars without occasional misunderstandings:

After they had entranced my wife suddenly when sitting in a chair, I suggested that she must always be lying down before they put her to sleep. They seemed ignorant of our surroundings, and would have done so at some inconvenient time or place; once when they had given their signal in a restaurant they explained that because we had spoken of a garden they had thought we were in it. . . .

Servants at the other end of the house were disturbed by a "whistling ghost," and so much so that I had to ask the communicators to choose some other sign.

The comedy of this has the look of being unconscious: the reportage hastens on with its burden, passing up occasions for laughter: empirically, crossed connections between the material and the insubstantial realms are simply part of the story to be told, and telling it is the main business of this prose. Indeed, Yeats is at pains to assure us of his scrupulous fidelity to observed phenomena: "upon one occasion when my wife smelt hyacinth, a friend smelt eau-de-cologne." In the interests of truth, even malodorous manifestations must be duly, if gingerly, reported: "a smell of cat's excrement announced some being that had to be expelled."

The low-key humor of this disarms disbelief: it shows us that the poet is just like ourselves, mildly but not seriously disarrayed by what we must all agree, after all, is a most *curious* experience. If, however, we entertain the possibility that this humor is conscious, that it points in an unemphatic way to a strategy of put-on, the comedy suddenly becomes a knowing wink from the author, letting us know that we are in on some kind of joke. Viewed in this way, the Gulliverian poker face (“you won’t believe this, but . . .”) pushes the events we are reading about gently but firmly in the direction of the ludicrous and the incredible; toward a comic response, that is, and toward fiction.

Returning to the text with our angle of vision suitably adjusted we find, in fact, other suggestions that the “reportage,” for all its casual appearance, is highly estheticized. We learn, for example, that when the automatic writing first commenced, “The unknown writer took his theme at first from my just published *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*”; that is, from one of Yeats’s own books. As this same paragraph unfolds, its frame of reference remains firmly fictional: Yeats compares himself, not to Paracelsus, but to Browning’s Paracelsus, and to Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister, “his history written by another.” And when we recall that Yeats, a notoriously obsessive reviser, spent over fifteen years reworking *A Vision*, we are likely to question the “Introduction’s” casual pretense of work-in-progress. When Yeats tells us that the original edition contained deceptions, our response is not confidence in his candor, but an increased readiness to look askance at the final version as well. The “Introduction” sports an epigraph about introductions drawn from Swift, whose exploitations of the pseudonym, the non-existent editor, The Introduction, The Address To the Reader, The Letter From the Author’s Cousin, The Printer’s Apologie, The Digression, The Footnote, The Marginalium, make him, as Hugh Kenner has pointed out, past master of the comic manipulation of the format of the printed book.

While wondering whether or not there is anything to these ambiguous appearances, we may reconsider one large and indisputable irony that critics haven’t been sufficiently alive to, and that is the elaborately literary gesture of situating Ezra Pound, whose contempt for Yeats’s occult interests was loud and long-standing, so honorifically in the opening pages of a volume that “will proclaim a new divinity.” In one of Yeats’s journals, Pound

figures as a type of skepticism, so there is a rich comedy in Yeats's presentation of his esoteric epitome to so unreceptive a friend; and Yeats unemphatically acknowledges as much in suggesting that Pound is something like his anti-self, a poet "whose art is the opposite of mine, whose criticism commends what I most condemn." (Thirty-odd years later, Pound remembered: "Once out at Rapallo I tried for God's sake to prevent him from printing a thing. I told him it was rubbish. All he did was print it with a preface saying that I *said* it was rubbish.") The estheticized sketch of Rapallo, too, with its allusions to Keats, affronts the emerging "activist" Pound, whose move to Rapallo betokened a rejection of arty postures in favor of economics, politics, and *temporis acti*.

If such nudges suggest fiction only ambiguously—and they should do no more, for the best tall tales are those we can't decide whether or not to believe—if such nudges, then, suggest fiction only ambiguously, it is expressly into fiction that we are hurled headlong when we turn to *Stories of Michael Robartes And His Friends: An Extract From A Record Made By His Pupils*. (We note without comment that while "stories" cues us toward fiction, "extract" and "record" wave a blatantly fraudulent rag of documentary in our faces.) Under the aspect of fiction, Yeats grows expansive, holding commerce with a few of his earlier selves, presenting a few farcical emblems of *A Vision* itself, and engaging in banter with a few of his fictional characters; he even contrives, like a good press agent, to extract from one of them an advance review, as it were, of *A Vision*, more sympathetic than any it has received since.

The *Stories* begins with a longish first-person narrative signed "John Duddon"; its comically vertiginous device is the ancient one of a tale-within-a-tale-within-a-tale: narrators enter, succeed one another, and spin yarns within yarns. The confusion of speaker and story that results immediately overtakes all but the most indefatigable attention to quotation marks and inverted commas; the effect is to blur the outlines of the various antithetical pairs we encounter, permitting anti-selves to change places with dizzying facility. First we meet Daniel O'Leary, an excitable sort whom we can immediately identify as a caricature of Yeats in the years 1902 to 1906 or so: this fellow is obsessed with his own lack of courage and self-possession; he also holds Yeatsian ideas about verse drama, and his great moral crisis occurs at a theatre where a "realistic" production of *Romeo And Juliet* sends him into fits of

anxiety. He finally works up the great courage required to fling his boots at the stage, and naturally his aim is faulty. Fleeing the theatre, he bumps into a strange old man who ushers him into a waiting cab, hands him fresh footwear, and remarks tranquilly: "I was told to wait at the corner for a man without boots."

Next we hear of the love triangle of Huddon, Duddon, and a young girl who "insists on calling herself Denise de L'Isle Adam." Between Duddon and the girl there is true love, sealed by impotence; between Huddon and the girl there is a relation frankly carnal. Duddon, the impotent one, is a penniless artist; Huddon, the virile one, is a wealthy man of the world, and Duddon's only patron. Their bickerings are punctuated at intervals by Denise's inconsequential bids for attention, to which neither pays the slightest heed.

Enter Robartes and Aherne, who tell us the story of the *Speculum Angelorum Et Hominum* ("the mirror of angels and men"); the discovery of this obscure and mutilated old book (most of its pages are, in fact, missing) is an absurd yarn involving "a ballet-dancer who had not an idea in her head," another, different female, "an ignorant girl of the people" with whom Robartes "cohabited" (Gulliverian word) in rooms "ostentatious in their sordidness," and an Arab tribe, the Judwalis, whose ritual dances "leave upon the sand traces full of symbolical meaning."

We next hear of John Bond and Mary Bell, whose story involves their deception, while he lived, of Mary's husband, an eccentric who has retired from human endeavor to work for the redemption of birds, which will occur, he believes, when cuckoos build nests. "I decided to devote my life to the cuckoos," the pious old gentleman humbly remarks; "My great object was of course to persuade them to make nests; but for a long time they were so obstinate, so unteachable, that I almost despaired. But the birth of a son renewed my resolution . . ." The son, of course, was begotten on this man's wife by John Bond; but the wife is determined to sustain her husband's illusions, even to the extent of presenting him, on his deathbed, with a counterfeit cuckoo's nest, conscientiously crafted after the best scientific knowledge (furnished her by Bond) of what a cuckoo's nest would be like if cuckoos built nests.

So then: two adulterers laboring to maintain the illusions of the man they are cuckolding by means of an artifact so crafted as to be indistinguishable from its model in nature, which model, however,

doesn't exist. This farcical bit of nonsense presents a paradigm sufficiently complex of the relations of art, artist, audience, nature, knowledge and illusion. We shall return to it, but let us here simply remark the wit of Yeats's so orchestrating his fable that our attention moves from a bogus bird's nest to a mysterious ivory box from which is produced, with appropriate ceremony, "an egg the size of a swan's." It is (as "those of you who are learned in the classics will have recognized") the Third Ledean Egg, and like *A Vision*, it is equipped with a dubious provenance: purchased from an old man in a green turban in Teheran, says Robartes, until Aherne points out that Robartes was never in Teheran, at which Robartes shrugs and says, "Perhaps Aherne is right."

Robartes and Aherne have appointed themselves to supervise the egg's portentous hatching; amid much talk of antinomies and antitheses, the two announce their impending departure for the desert, where the egg will be buried and hatched by the sun's warmth, after which divine influxes can be relied upon to ensue. All of which having been said, "Robartes put the egg in its box again, and said good-bye to us one after the other."

The comedy of the Huddon/Duddon/Denise triangle establishes an ironic distance between the author of *A Vision* and the star-crossed lover laid waste by Maud Gonne; the O'Leary story does the same to the young "activist" Yeats. The Robartes/Aherne comedy likewise invests Yeats's lifelong interest in the occult with an affectionate facetiousness, even as it insists that their eccentricities and his are to be seen as continuous. The John Bond/Mary Bell story accuses all fictive activity of deceit and illusion, of creating simulacra of nonexistent realities; at the same time there are clear hints that this activity has redemptive possibilities. That implausible cuckoo's nest, whose author insists it is genuine, offered to a dying man desperately in need of it, and enabling him to die happy, is a suggestive (and elaborately ludicrous) emblem of *A Vision* itself, offered to a doubt-ridden public as a "system" for understanding the cycles of history and the individual soul.

It is especially suggestive that Yeats didn't suppress the original, farcical account of his system's genesis when making his final revisions, but retained it, counterposing it neatly with the new, "genuine" account (and, of course, seeming to make a clean breast of it by explaining that "I was fool enough to write half a dozen poems that are unintelligible without it": the poems are not named

and I can think of none that fit the description). Between its two editions, *A Vision*'s most interesting change is the superimposition of another explanation of where it came from, a particular in which it resembles the universe in which Yeats grew up. Like the book of nature, the text of *A Vision* remains essentially the same; only the question of authorship is substantially complicated, and in a way to trouble conventions of belief.

If *A Vision* has a factual and a fictional origin, it also has a factual and a fictional author: the factual author, of course, is Yeats; his fictional counterpart, compellingly enough, is presented by means of a visual aid, a woodcut of the author of *Speculum Angelorum Et Hominum*, a certain Giraldus, said by one of Yeats's more "literal-minded" fictional characters to bear a strong resemblance to Yeats himself. Than this woodcut there can be no better "objective correlative" of all the elaborate textual put-on in which we have been for so long now entailed; nor can there be any more decisive validation of the rather tortuous argument I have been trying to advance. This face is the acid test; let the (properly) skeptical reader look below, then, and contemplate for a moment the inscrutable smile and shift eyes of that supremely crafty visage. His hand is extended towards us, proffering, no doubt, a mystic and revelation-bearing manuscript; his ancient glittering eyes are gay with the assurance that he knows more than we, and always will. He is laughing at us; and we haven't even noticed. Is there any doubt that we have to do here with a shell game magus?

A Vision's double genesis elaborates a paradoxical mirror-imaging of fact and fiction central to all of Yeats's thought about the imagination: note that the farcical account of the system's origin implies, via conventions we take for granted, an empirically tenable origin (namely fiction), while the purportedly "true" account asks us to believe literally what our every impulse insists is impossible. We contrive to believe fiction, and are perplexed to understand "facts." Such manipulations are discernible beneath Yeats's earliest concern with the "transmutation of life into art," words found on the first page of *Rosa Alchemica*. We have already noted that book's way of keeping its status as "fiction" equivocal; on *Rosa Alchemica*'s opening page we hear of an earlier book, by the same author, also called *Rosa Alchemica*, a move which anticipates that which we have just observed in *A Vision*: the actual book in the reader's hand, and its actual author, are each furnished with a fictional avatar.



Portrait of Giraldus

A like blurring of fact and fiction is also enacted comically in the prefatory matter of *A Vision* (and elsewhere) by Yeats's willingness to get into elaborate exchanges, quarrels, commiserations, etc. with his fictional characters. The careers of Robartes and Aherne illustrate this process: they first appear in *Rosa Alchemica* where they so discompose our narrator that he precipitately takes flight to his study and his rosary beads; they reappear in *A Vision*, but now Yeats stands in a posture of aloof disdain toward them. He communicates with them only through an intermediary, Aherne's brother John, who reports that Robartes and Aherne are annoyed with Yeats for exposing (and misrepresenting!) their activities of thirty years earlier in *Rosa Alchemica*: a salient objection is to the Paterian prose of that volume, and as we have observed, the *Stories of Michael Robartes* makes giddy fun of several Paterian types. It is John Aherne who tells us (remarking coolly that it "interests, but does not astonish" him) that Yeats's system duplicates that of Gi-

raldus's *Speculum Angelorum Et Hominum*, although neither he nor anyone else has ever seen its missing pages.

Here endeth the prefatory matter; on the next page the exposition of the "system" proper begins with a poem, "The Phases of the Moon," and it is here that the transactions of the fictive Robartes and Aherne with their actual author attain unprecedented comic complexity. The two stand beneath Yeats's tower, looking up at his lamp-lit window, and mock at the futility of his enterprise: "He has found, after the manner of his kind,/ Mere images," sneers Robartes, himself one of those images: "and now he seeks in book or manuscript/ What he shall never find." What Yeats seeks, it is implied, can be found not in book or manuscript in the high tower, but outside, in nature, in experience, on the muddy road where Robartes and Aherne are journeying. The characters claim knowledge that their author can never attain; they mock his ignorance; but then, when Aherne asks Robartes to sing that knowledge, he remarks of the song: "mine author sung it me"; mysteriously, the text puts these words in quotation marks. Why? To remind us, perhaps, of the presence of the author? To remind us that Robartes and Aherne lead an existence purely textual? To remind us that their quest, their muddy road, their very persons, have been invented by Yeats, and in book or manuscript? In any case, Robartes sings the song, Aherne wishes he were warm and dry in the tower, and a bat, like the ones Robartes has mentioned earlier in the poem as emblematic of Phase One, of all knowledge at last unified in objective darkness, rises with a cry, and the light in the tower abruptly goes out! Has the author pulled rank on the characters by terminating the poem which they inhabit? Or has he been guileful enough to eavesdrop at the window while Robartes sings his song?

It is worth remarking that the comedy of this poem is generally lost on readers, who immediately apply themselves to the doctrine of the twenty-eight phases Robertes sings of; in a laconic note on this and two other poems, Yeats remarks: "To some extent, I wrote these poems as texts for exposition." But the implications of the poem's comedy are that the system is fictional (it comes out of the mouth of a fictional character), and that Yeats is in some way master of his fictional characters (in the poem, he never deigns to confront them; whereas thirty years earlier, their first appearance in his work, in *Rosa Alchemica*, had resulted from his seeking them out; having done so, he was entirely overwhelmed by them, as we

have noted, so that his encounters with them ended in terror and months of clutching his rosary).

If I were not reluctant to plunge into the stuff of Yeatsian esoterica proper, I might be tempted to suggest a comic reading of the whole of *A Vision*: on the first page, in the first paragraph, of the first book, for example, we find that dicta from Empedocles are exactly reversed by the learned commentaries of one Burnet which Yeats adduces as if to clear things up; in paragraph two, we are referred to an ancient scholiast on Aristotle who goes by the dubious name of Simplicius. But that way madness lies: we have already earned the right to ask, What effect has all this on the “system” *A Vision* presents? We may savor first the amusement Yeats, an auto-didact who failed his university entrance exams, derives from holding forth in commanding tones (and to a public he fully expected wouldn’t listen) on the lifetime imaginative creation which is his esoteric system, and enforcing our perplexed assent by insisting that the story of its other-worldly deliverers is *literally* true: that the fiction is unacknowledged would be a practical joke, in the tradition of Swift’s Discourses, Meditations, Proposals, and other assorted “Irish bulls” on an age committed to the fallacy that “myth” means the opposite of “fact.” (More particularly, the joke is on literary critics, whose gingerly solicitousness in dealing with “the problem of Yeats’s *beliefs*” emerge as more and more distinctly risible.) I have already asked the reader to consider the art of the tall tale and the complex comedy that results, implicating all overly serious response, from the indignation of the skeptic, who promptly erects a shield of irrelevant rationality, to the eager credulity of the sensitive soul with pretenses to mystic knowledge; the wink is to the hearer who perceives, among other things, the considerable interest of these postures. It is a certain single-mindedness that is being satirized, the obtuseness of being earnest.

Looked at from the opposite direction, the self-evident (but unacknowledged) ludicrousness of the “system” (a richly comic word, really, for that funhouse of gyres and cones), the protestations of crankiness, absurdity, madness, even hoax that it invites, and that it undoubtedly amused Yeats to anticipate, makes of *A Vision* a heroic, gay, quixotic *credo quia impossibile est*, rising ebulliently out of the stony rubbish of the disillusioned postwar wasteland: the very implausibility, that is, lends intensity to the ferocity of Yeats’s witness.

For it is a faith he is witnessing, although less a faith in the ghosts and Great Wheels than in his own power (and ours) to imagine, and make something of them. To say as much only points to what so many poems tell us again and again, that making and remaking the soul is a conscious, deliberate activity, a disciplined recovery of "radical innocence" that is only possible through volitional imaginative activity, which is to say fictive activity. For the fictions we make transform us; but the regnant materialism of Yeats's age scorned the fictions of imagination in favor of "facts," supposed to be "real" in some ungainsayable way. In reality (Yeats would have said), "facts," "science," and so on are only the mainstay of another fiction, or myth, the myth of science: when we say we are mastering "facts," we are only making matter the measure of our minds, so that "fact" masters us, narrowing the possibilities of "human" prerogative and imagination. A fiction, like science, that we have forgotten how to disbelieve, has us in its power: that it thus enslaves us by offering mastery over nature is a supreme irony. *A Vision's* prefatory play indicates the power of fact and fiction to accommodate each other, to metamorphose into each other. Each becomes, with a slight rolling of the beholder's eye (such as Giralduus has clearly got the hang of) its anti-self. Fact and fiction (since man made up the whole) exist on a continuum, rather than in an either/or relationship; the two are gyre and cone, or the yolk and white of the one shell. Yeats invites us to join his enterprise, and bring to it our whole minds; we are invited to indulge freely both our belief and our doubt, our urge to revere and our impulse to mock. Yeats has fabricated a text to which any discerning response will be relevant: we needn't willingly suspend anything.

All of this in a book of which Yeats once remarked that people would not read it, although they would be glad it was there: this too seems half mockery, for the book has, if anything, only perplexed its readers. The relevant gloss is to be found in a poem called "The Apparitions":

Because there is safety in derision,
I talked about an apparition,
I took no trouble to convince,
Or seem plausible to a man of sense,
Distrustful of that popular eye
Whether it be bold or sly.

Fifteen apparitions have I seen;
The worst a coat upon a coat-hanger.

To write *A Vision*, which no one will read; to talk nonsense to the man of sense: for poet and man of sense alike, there is safety in derision. Which apparition is worse, Yeats's ghosts and gyres, or the mechanistic utilitarian's, in which all mysterious life, including our own, emerges as but a coat draped over a chair, old clothes upon a stick to scare feathers upon a stick still smaller? This poem asserts safety in derision, then turns to mock safety and derision both.

I have been using the term "comedy" (rather loosely) to designate a range of things from the most forthright farce to the most subtly elaborate textual flimflam. The devices we have noted serve to effect a comic distancing of the poet from us and from the work—indeed, the more attentively we read, the more difficult it becomes to locate the poet with any assurance at all: the eyes of Giraldus seem to smile at us across abysses ever deeper, and from realms ever more remote. "Textual flimflam" is an aspect of Yeatsian comedy that, I believe, characterizes the middle phase of Yeats's career, though its roots are discernible in the deliberately contrived ambiguities of Yeats's nineties verse. It arises from the fact that for his readers, the poet is a *text*, a *book*, and it is significant that in the poems, the appearance of a book or a bookish man generally betokens an occasion for irony; this happens in what I have called a paradigm of Yeatsian comedy, when the poet's chance remark exposes the vapidity of lovers who "quote with sighs and learned looks/ Precedents out of beautiful old books." A more familiar instance might be "Michael Robartes and the Dancer," in which a beautiful girl yawns while a self-important old curmudgeon babbles a torrent of Yeatsian chatter to the effect that books are of no value to the physically beautiful, and then adduces a Latin text "to prove me right." No critic will have failed to pause over "The Scholars"; many promptly cite another text (to prove *them* right) which assures us that truth flourishes where the student's lamp has shone. These attitudes toward bookish activity are usually mentioned as evidence of Yeats's antithetical conceptions of "action" and "contemplation." But the two attitudes, or better, the cycle of postures in which the attitudes represent but distinct phases, are themselves contained in an elaborately made *book*, a book uniquely

contemplative *and* uniquely active. The book whose pages we turn when we read Yeats is the tangible token ("symbol"?) of that *tertium quid* from which all Yeatsian antitheses emanate, or better, the center of that circle described by the progress of the moon through its twenty-eight phases, earth, the stone at the heart of all. If the unceasing motion of a changing moon around the periphery of a moving circle is the emblem of *A Vision*, and if that book occupies, as I believe, a comic realm, then we might be tempted to locate Yeats's tragic sense at the sublunary center. Certainly a constant note of bitterness is audible throughout Yeats's poetry from "The Song of the Happy Shepherd" (who doesn't sound at all happy) to "Under Ben Bulbin," with its injunction to cast a cold eye. Detachment and distance define Yeatsian comedy, and in *A Vision* it reaches a kind of purity, a freedom from bitterness such as no sequence of poems can sustain; it is for that reason that I have focussed on *A Vision* here. But a much harsher mix of darkness and levity obtains in the poems. If we regard *A Vision* as a comic emanation, then the *Collected Poems* is the ground from which that emanation proceeds. I don't mean that the two books are antithetical, that one is comic, the other tragic; for the *Collected Poems* is the marriage bed that resolves all such antinomies in Yeats's work. It is in that center that tragic and comic sense alike are inalienably rooted, where, in fact, they are in perpetual conjunction, related perhaps as are gravity and centrifugal force: one conduces to flights, the other to falls. Gravity keeps us here, yet would crush us if our planet didn't spin. All is balance, a conjunction of contraries, an insight Yeats telescoped into the phrase "tragic joy." This is paradox, not antithesis; and we are heightening a paradox, not enforcing an opposition, when we note that if Yeats's joy is tragic, his rage and despair are also comic, a sort of battered kettle at the heel.

MARCIA B. SIEGEL

The Flimsy Vault

THE NEW YORK CITY BALLET STRIKE knocked out seven weeks of performances and left bleak thoughts about the future of dance in this crumbling city. The winter's events offered us a warning, perhaps even a portent. Whatever it is that we take for granted as New York dance, an amalgam of energy and ambition, glamour and dedication, creativity and hype, dancers and dance companies of every variety, may not be any safer from decay than the subways at this point. Perhaps it's the pathetic fallacy—art imitating life—that makes the whole thing so bitter to take. We don't expect art to be quite so vulnerable to the evils of a social system. In fact, maybe that's one reason we cherish art.

The politics of the strike were more complex than one could learn from the handouts. On the surface, the NYCB orchestra wanted a raise and the company couldn't pay, but morally there are several sides to that. Should musicians get twice as much as the dancers they play for just because they have a stronger union? Could the company have found the money to meet the demand? Do the musicians need/deserve more recognition, or is it time off for moonlighting they want? Can a musician's talent, performing longevity, or training be equated with that of a dancer? Is the NYCB orchestra unique among ballet orchestras, or the equal of a symphony orchestra?

But once we've all decided our own answers to these questions, there remain some adamant and conflicting realities of today's dance industry. It seems to me that scale is a most serious factor. Dance is on a six-lane escalator with a two-lane road at the top. Since the advent of government subsidy, about ten years ago, all dance companies have been under pressure to expand their operations—to do more performances so they can reach more audience, which will produce bigger budgets and more employment for the dancers. All these things impress the fund-allocators because they are so much more concrete and measurable than any estimates of the companies' artistic merit. In fact, the arts lobby that mobilizes support for appropriations here in New York State doesn't even mention artistic merit in its propaganda—its arguments are wholly economic.

Imperceptibly, a company passes the point of no return. Its commitments are too inflated to make small cutbacks, so in order to survive it must either produce more, or raise more money, or "broaden its base"—meaning, lower its creative sights so it can have more popular appeal. Often it must do all three. The alternative—total collapse or dormancy.

At the same time, the control that creative artists can exercise over their own output is steadily diminishing, as professional managers come in to oversee their increasingly complex operations. These middlepersons can

communicate with funding agencies, where artists are thought to be dizzy and irresponsible. Rather than try to fight its own little way through, a company might put its affairs in the hands of a producing organization that has no artistic identity at all, only the machinery to make artistic packages. Then the package can be marketed to bigger audiences, which in New York means bigger theaters that have higher price tags on rentals and union contracts.

For many dance companies, the union problem is the most unrealistic of all the costs of success. In the old days, when hiring an orchestra was out of the question, dancers found alternatives—they worked with small ensembles, they used tape, they accompanied themselves with onstage instruments, they danced to silence or electronic music. They did without elaborate scenery and costumes, keeping their production staffs down to a highly skilled lighting designer and a specialist stage manager who called the show with a small crew. But this could only work in relative obscurity. Once on Broadway—a figurative term for just about all the legitimate theaters and concert halls from Lincoln Center down to Times Square—they face a monolithic union setup which was born of the commercial theater. Having virtually killed that off, the stagehands, electricians, musicians and others are featherbedding their way into the non-commercial, very nonprofit dance budgets, where the box office can never meet overhead. Either subsidy pays, or the game is rained out. Local 802's NYCB musicians finally backed down on their most extreme demands; after considerable bad press and threats from management, perhaps they decided they might actually destroy the company if they held out too long.

Another issue in the 802 strike had to do with guaranteed work. Formerly, the City Center 55th Street Theater, home of the Joffrey Ballet and the Alvin Ailey company, was run by the same umbrella that runs NYCB. When City Ballet was not performing in Lincoln Center, members of its orchestra were hired to work in the other house. Last year the City Center management relinquished control of the 55th Street house—the real estate barons have had their eye on the old Mecca Temple for years as a potential parking lot or other income-producer. Several dance companies joined together to try to save the old theater, but the tacit agreement with 802 was no longer in effect. Apparently neither the Joffrey nor American Ballet Theater, which occupied City Center during January, offered to join in the strike negotiations, nor were they asked to by the company or the state mediators, even though a major demand of the union was for salary during fourteen weeks in which the NYCB does *not* perform. The musicians took less—how much less was not immediately announced, as everyone went back to work at the State Theater and tried to forget the recent unpleasantness.

But for NYCB, there will be another contract to make in four years, and our other ballet companies will face the music much sooner than that. Not two weeks after the return of the City Ballet came the announcement that the Joffrey Ballet's four-week spring season was off. The reasons given were economic—it would cost more to perform than not to. I suspect the

Joffrey is also trying to avoid a confrontation with 802, which has let it be known that it's going to browbeat the other companies with its new NYCB contract. We didn't entirely get cheated out of the Joffrey this season. In addition to its regular fall run, the company did an extra two-week Christmas mini-season of two alternating short programs. This adds up to roughly a week less than if we'd had a spring Joffrey, but it's *three* weeks less than the five-week run Joffrey did last spring.

Meanwhile, Ballet Theater economized by cancelling its fall out-of-town tour and some spring dates this season, and giving New York a ho-hum January consisting of two weeks of *Coppelia* and two weeks of *Giselle*. ABT seems to exist in a permanent state of dishevelment, but this winter its lack of a unified direction was especially visible. Only last summer ABT was flaunting an opulent lineup of imported star dancers—nobody knows what they were being paid—and there were mutterings in the ranks about how ABT's American talent was being ignored. So for the winter season the management was going to feature its own dancers. This move, which was supposed to raise morale, only seemed to divide the company further, between the eager few assigned the spotlight, and the troops remaining in the background, who were looking more demoralized and depleted than ever. Some of those who were called on for principal or solo roles simply couldn't handle the technical demands of the dancing; others lacked a total sense of the character they were playing. I began to feel what it must be like in some provincial city, where the local ballet company does its three-times-a-year weekend "seasons," always breaking in green performers, never staying in contact with its audience long enough to offer ballet as a mature theater art.

New York dance lives in a crisis-with-personalities atmosphere. Dance is too new a phenomenon for the public to be sure whether it's an entertainment commodity or something that's good for tourism or one more statistic in the Gross National Product. But way down deep, we think we're buying ourselves a culture with our subsidies, whatever else we may get along with it. Dance is worth keeping alive—and pragmatically, keeping it alive means keeping it in front of the public. However you have to do that, runs the current rationale, survival is the name of the game.

But in dance, above all the other arts, the value—the legitimacy of its need to exist—can only be established at the moment of performance. There is, essentially, no dance history, no literature, no repertory apart from what is being shown us in our time. People who deal with the other arts—fund granters included—usually don't realize the tenuousness of dance's hold on the culture. It has no museums or libraries where past examples of its greatness can be witnessed and proven by succeeding generations. There are intellectuals who rule it out solely on the grounds of its ephemerality: anything you can't write down cannot possibly be of use to the ages. If we can call it art at all, we have to be talking about the dance that is with us now.

This places a huge responsibility on the companies that make repertory

their business, and Ballet Theater is of course the chief among those, with the New York City Ballet. From its inception almost forty years ago, ABT has undertaken to present European and American ballets, reaching as far back as the oldest ballets extant. Although it probably doesn't think of itself in exactly these terms, Ballet Theater is sustaining the ballet tradition in this country. Or a ballet tradition anyway. The condition in which they present the classics, reflecting their whole underlying attitude toward the classics, becomes a basic ingredient of the image that the next generation will have about ballet.

What Ballet Theater gave us this winter was an image of the classics as big numbers. Full-length costume productions with fat leading roles and accessible stories and music. Audience numbers. I'm sure *Giselle* and *Coppelia* have always been that, but their *art* consists of something else. In the new book *Baryshnikov at Work*,¹ the extraordinary dancer speaks about the ballets he has danced since leaving Russia, and demonstrates why he is more than a thrill-provoking star. Baryshnikov's dancing is profound because he can say things like this about Michel Fokine's 1911 classic, *Petrouchka*: "... it is indeed a theatre of feelings, of psychological relationships, of political relationships—it is a whole world unto itself. A world of secrets that do not lock us out; of secrets that can nourish us forever." When I see ABT do *Petrouchka*, or *Giselle* or *Coppelia* or anything else, I wonder if anyone in the company ever thinks of ballets this way. Baryshnikov makes his guest appearances, and then his commitment, his total immersion in the "theatre of feelings" draws the company into some deeper theatrical life. But the rest of the time there's no sense of magic or community or manners, or anything that makes a connection between a particular stage event and the inner life we all live.

Without that, *Coppelia* is reduced to madcap antics and *Giselle* to a series of solos in a picturesque landscape. I often have the feeling I'm looking at a program of Highlights from the ballet I've come to see—like those opera and ballet records that play all the showy stuff and leave out all the linkages.

Just how little the ABT management cares about the wholeness of these productions can easily be discovered if one tries to follow any plot line or action or character or role relationship for logic. Deborah Jowitt devoted her entire *Village Voice* review of *Coppelia* to pointing out some of the inconsistencies in what is supposed to be a believable plot. Even the synopses carried in the program describe things that never happen, as if they'd been written for some long-forgotten production and never referred to since.

The principal dancers are permitted any sort of business that will make their part look good. Often they borrow from other dancers' successful interpretations and gags, and apparently they can take liberties one used to associate with only the great stars, like cutting or changing the choreo-

¹ BARYSHNIKOV AT WORK, by Mikhail Baryshnikov, with photographs by Martha Swopf. Knopf, \$17.50.

graphy, or leaving the stage when they're not soloing. No one in the corps de ballet ever seems to know what time of day it is or why they've arrived on the stage or where they're going when they leave. As Ballet Theater gives us these classics, they are neither illusion nor great choreography, they're just sporting events—long weary passages when the stage has no focus or intensity, punctuated by adrenalin-filled gestures that seem special even if nothing special is achieved.

ABT's failure to show us the full riches of the works in their keeping seems to come specifically from the artistic diffusion within the company, but there are so many other chinks through which the essence of a dance experience can dribble away. The European companies have had a knack for repertory we never acquired in this country—but even such immaculate showcases as England's Royal Ballet and the Royal Danish have allowed the popular taste for spectacle and stunts to influence their presentations in recent years.

The most devoted purists among us can't deny the effect of television and jet travel on the public's sensibilities. Even if seventy-five percent of what we see on the small tube is hype, technology has also made the most gifted artists of our age accessible to everyone. We would not be human, dancers would not be human, if we didn't want somehow to take part in their magnificence—or at least pretend we had hold of it. Even if permanent state protection were granted to American dance companies, as under the European system, the integrity of repertory might not be secured against the craving for speed, violence, flash that possesses us now.

Our dance has developed much more fruitfully under the handicaps and freedom of the individual controlling artist, and that seems to me still our best hope for dance's future. The New York City Ballet may not offer us a literature of Western ballet, but it certainly encompasses the achievement of one superb artist. Among the fifty-odd ballets in its New York schedule for a normal year, the NYCB can survey almost the entire length of George Balanchine's choreographic career. Here we have another "authenticity" problem, because Balanchine does make changes. He rechoreographs when a dance doesn't satisfy him or its details have been forgotten after a period of time; he adds new material to things that have been performed continuously; he recostumes and recasts, often in contradiction to what we've come to accept as a ballet's style. To me this is justified because it's being done by the artist who created the work in the first place, and it's being done in a context of that artist's evolution. The size and intentions of the New York City Ballet change, the dancers change, along with the things they can do best. I guess I'd prefer it if we could see the original *Apollo* or *Danses Concertantes* too, somewhere, but I can be satisfied with transient glory when I know it's the product of a great artist's workshop. The same is true of Merce Cunningham.

Although seemingly at opposite ends of the spectrum artistically, Cunningham and Balanchine have some similar notions about what their work is and how we ought to absorb it into our lives. They are doers, not

conservers. The dance they're making now and the dancers they have now are what interest them; they have let the past go without regret, mainly, I think, because they don't want to use up energy on it. When Balanchine looks back on his past, it's for practical reasons; he does repertory because it provides a structure big enough to realize his visions. Cunningham does not do repertory because it drags down his visions. Balanchine spent forty years creating a working environment in which he would be safe from economic and political reverses. Yet he was capable of saying, during the strike this winter, that if the company collapsed, he would find another place to work.

Merce Cunningham has purposely steered his company around the institutional elephant pits, in order to gain the same kind of security. He keeps us off balance about what he's committed to do—one minute the company is performing in its own studio, then on Broadway, then on nationwide TV, in an off-Broadway house, back to the studio. His repertory can be turned into a collage of movement events, or it can be produced theatrically, or adjusted to the TV picture. As erratic as this may be, the Cunningham manages to be on public view for more of the year than any other modern dance company, and is flexible enough to give its director the creative leeway he needs. And that has to end up to the audience's advantage. At least, for this American audience, in this time, it's certainly the most vital of the alternatives.

James Joyce

The Citizen and the Artist

C. H. Peake. Drawing heavily on Joyce's own statements about his art, this straightforward and penetrating study examines *Dubliners*, *A Portrait of the Artist*, and *Ulysses* as reflections of Joyce's attempts to reconcile the claims of family, country, and church with his aspirations and dreams. The author demonstrates that for all their modernist complexity, Joyce's writings succeed because they possess the traditional literary values; they survive because they articulate a profound vision of life by methods not fundamentally different from the conventional methods of the novelist. \$16.95



Stanford University Press

CHARLES W. MILLARD

Morris Louis¹

THERE ARE AT LEAST TWO WAYS in which Morris Louis' career seems paradigmatic of artistic careers in the middle of the twentieth century. The first of these is the relative lateness with which Louis came to maturity—he was well past forty when he arrived at the style that was to secure his place among the more important painters of his time. The second is the fact that his long period of artistic preparation was focused and transformed by contact with a work that seemed to free him from his past and open suddenly the artistic future toward which he had been groping. What looks at this remove like Louis' *Damascus Road*, however it may have been experienced internally, was his contact with Helen Frankenthaler's *Mountains and Sea*—for others it has been not a single work but a group of works by one or several artists. The pattern in such cases is that of a man who has a calling (without knowing what shape that calling is to take in its maturity), who pursues various avenues open to him without complete satisfaction, and who is finally rewarded by something in the external world that reflects back to him the path he must take—the calling theretofore veiled internally. In this pattern, the preparatory pursuit of what may seem wholly disparate avenues takes on the character of a working through, of coming to grips with different forces—in Louis' case, with different artistic styles or ideas—in order to be free of them. Gorky and Still, to name only two other painters, have spoken of their early work in terms of just such a working through. With Louis, the process is evident in his work from the thirties through 1953.

The earliest work so far known by Louis is *Broken Bridge* of 1939. Sombre in color, it plays the craggy and fanciful shape of the eponymous bridge and the flattened wedge of a rowboat off against a conventional landscape schema—shore, river, mountains, and sky mounting in horizontal bands from the bottom of the canvas to the top. One is tempted to see in the subject a foreshadowing of the developmental pattern of Louis' career, the bridge that might lead directly from the near shore to that in the distance lying in ruins, the rowboat at hand for a longer, more arduous pilgrimage between the two points. Be all that as it may, the style of the painting, with its creamy impasto obviously and somewhat heavily applied, the aggressive black outlining, and the jagged silhouette that one knows to be a bridge only because of the title of the work, all indicate an attraction on Louis' part to German Expressionism, particularly to the work of Max Beckmann.

The next point of reference in the scanty evidence for Louis' early career

¹ These reflections on the work of Morris Louis were stimulated by the exhibition "Morris Louis: Major Themes and Variations" held at the National Gallery of Art from 12 September 1976 through 9 January 1977.

is provided by a group of works entitled *Charred Journal*, produced in 1951, and by related canvases such as *The Ladder* of 1950 and *Black and White* of 1952. In *The Ladder*, it is as if the landscape of *Broken Bridge* had integrated its elements to become a single atmospheric background, its impasto thinned almost to an inflected wash and the assertive bridge resolved into a black grid through which the lighter background is seen. The monochrome *Charred Journal* pictures reverse this tonal structure, playing off open, calligraphic dripped skeins of white against black backgrounds brushed so as to give glimpses of the canvas beneath. Pollock's contemporary black-on-white canvases are clearly acknowledged here. By the following year (1952), Louis had thickened his white skeins to take up equal canvas area with the black, and dripped more black on top of both. The result was a more intricate and intimately connected pictorial fabric than that of the 1951 pictures, and one that suppressed foreground-background and atmospheric effects in favor of more unified, if more congested, surface presence. Throughout these works one senses Louis' interest in drawing and in unifying drawing and shape. In 1953 he explored the latter problem in a series of collages called *Tranquilities*, which suggest Matisse's solution of the same problem as conveyed through the work of Robert Motherwell. Although there is little drawing as such in these works, the configurations of which recall those of the Motherwell *Elegies*, the cut edges of the collage elements function as drawing, so that the shapes create the drawing rather than the drawing creating the shapes. The long rectangular shapes of the *Tranquilities*, most of which intrude from the edges, are overlapped in tight cubicising compositions built around black, white, and a middle tone and relieved by occasional rounded forms wholly within the composition. As much as possible is kept on the surface of the picture, and a new scale suggests itself in the relationship between the sizes of the collage elements and that of the compositions they define.

The color that Louis seems to have purged from his art to explore drawing, shape, and pictorial structure returned in an extraordinary picture of 1953 entitled *Trellis*. Larger in size than anything he had thus far executed (roughly 6 × 8 feet), *Trellis* is an airy, decongested composition in which the dripped, spattered, and brushed paint defines only loose and irregular shapes, leaving broad areas of unpainted canvas as an atmospheric ground against which those shapes can breathe. By the following year, Louis had embarked on the series of works now known as *Veils*, in which paint was poured onto the canvas in thin, overlapping washes creating lambent patterns striated in the direction of the pouring. Variouslly flamelike or aquatic in effect, the color areas of these canvases seem at first to have been allowed to run off all four edges of the composition. As this effect was overbearing, however, the majority of the *Veils* were cropped so as to stop the color short of three sides of the canvas, creating an area roughly congruent to it and only slightly smaller in dimension. On occasion, all four edges of the color area were allowed to work themselves free of the sides of the canvas, creating an amorphous shape wholly contained within the picture. The great danger for the *Veils* was that their

shapes or their colors, or both, could be so indistinct as to fail to take command of the composition, and that the pictures shriveled for lack of authority. The best of them permit the shapes created by the pouring to register most completely within the overall shape of the veil itself, have the most "drawn" and irregular edges, and use hue at relatively high saturation. Louis achieved effects of saturation not only by using saturated individual hues, but by placing hues that reinforced one another over each other. Thus *Tet* (1958: most Louis titles are posthumous) succeeds in part because it employs a blue-green-violet color range that mixes well but also allows the individual hues to speak alone at different points of the composition. Muddiness and density are both inimical to the success of the Veils, the one pushing them toward indistinctness when the whole tendency of Louis' art was toward articulation, and the other creating hardened pictorial objects in works that tended to use color in an expansive and atmospheric way.

Two characteristics of some of the Veils, both of which became particularly pronounced in the late '50's, suggest the radical reversal that Louis was to achieve about 1960. The first of these was the appearance around the edges of the Veil shapes of small areas of pure hue at high intensity (*Dalet Tet*). These represented the beginning (or end) of a pour of paint, where the colors had not yet overlapped and mixed. They are most noticeable around the darkest and densest of the Veils, the darkness and density resulting from the very intensity of the hues seen at the edges, and suggest the difficulty of trying to make hue speak when only pale values result in openness when poured over one another. Such pictures as *Nun* (1959) play on this dilemma by keeping the atmospheric veil effect at some points of the canvas while allowing fingers of color to declare themselves in greater purity at others. The second tendency one notices in the later Veils is for the color area to be riven by one or more intrusions of raw canvas, creating veil-columns, sometimes symmetrical, sometimes not. Such divisions eventually permitted the color areas to travel outward to the edges of the canvas, reversing the roles of color and canvas by making the canvas function atmospherically while the color areas became delimiting barriers. This development eliminated the anomaly of the edge of flat, raw canvas surrounding three sides of what wanted to be a yielding atmosphere, often applying pressures on it that were both harmful and irresistible. Before it could be consummated however, color had to assert itself more discretely, and this Louis permitted to happen in the series known as Florals. In these pictures, almost all dated 1960, the overlapping veils have shrunk away from the tips of pure hue sometimes visible at their edges, permitting those tips to become radiating fingers of intense color. Their centripetal compositions, with intense and generally high-valued colors extending out from veiled centers, gave way to a few pictures in which stripes of pure color march across the canvas before finally resolving themselves into the powerful Unfurleds.

Throughout 1960, a year of incredible development and activity for Louis, the series now known as Unfurleds was produced. Large both in

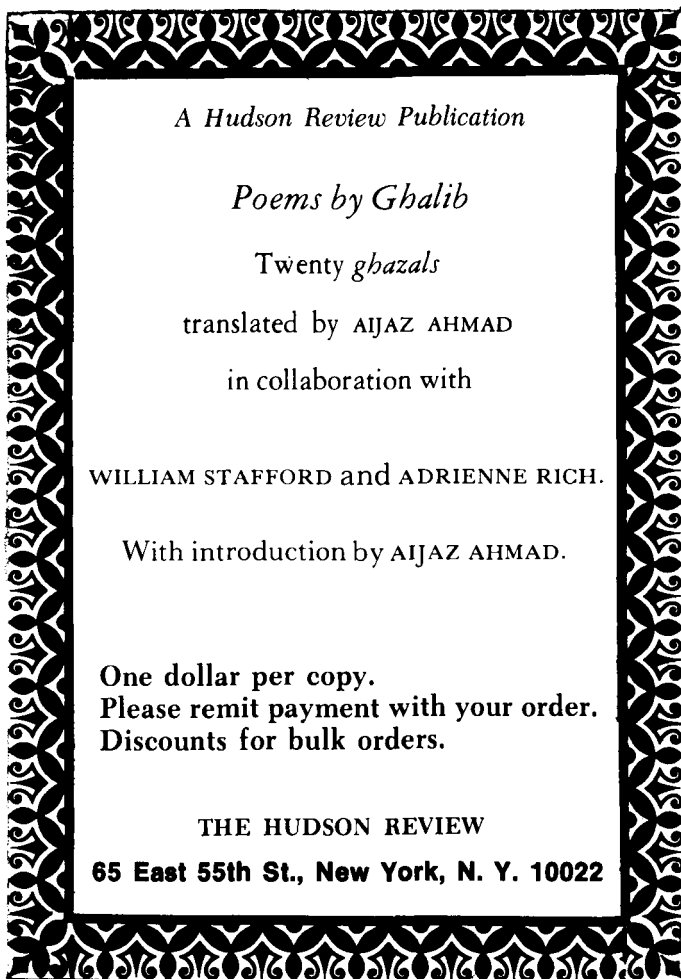
size and scale, these pictures are typically strongly horizontal in format. In them, what have been described as rivulets of saturated color run diagonally across the surface of the canvas, sometimes traversing it completely, sometimes grouped at each end in two areas which enter from the sides and run down toward the bottom center leaving about a third of the canvas at the bottom edge untouched. The resulting configuration reverses the schema of the Veils, using paint to assert the surface of the picture while the unpainted canvas opens out in uninflected spaciousness. The organizational and structural functions of color become all important in these pictures, in which the proportions of the canvas and the relation of painted to unpainted area take on new significance for Louis. In general, the fewer and broader the rivulets of color the more a strongly horizontal format, one which relaxes and opens out at the ends, suits the compositions. Those pictures with narrower and more numerous rivulets of color seem more comfortable in squarer formats, as the relationship between painted and unpainted areas is tighter. Their danger is that the rivulets, placed close together, may read as areas rather than as discrete colors. A picture such as *Beta Iota* has some of the best of both worlds by forking its rivulets on their way toward the bottom of the canvas, increasing the number of stripes without multiplying the number of hues.

Louis' manipulation of color in the Unfurleds is almost magical. Tending to use red, yellow, and orange at high value and blue, green, and violet at low, he plays hues off against one another to create maximum balance and tension. In *Alpha Epsilon*, for example, a vertical strip of unpainted canvas in the center of the composition divides the diagonal colors, which flow outward toward the top and bottom of the canvas calling to one another across the narrow center void. Organized around the armature provided by a black stripe, and around a slightly ascending value scale from top to bottom, the hues are arranged in intricate balance—a green and a violet at the right speaking to a blue at the left, a red-orange and a yellow at the left to a red-yellow at the right, etc. In works such as *Beta Iota*, with its large center void and stripes coming in from the ends, the uneven number of stripes (five at the left, three at the right) is compensated by a value difference, the greater pictorial weight of the few dark hues at the right balancing the more numerous light hues at the left. In the squarer pictures with a dozen or more thinner stripes at the ends, a similar value difference could unbalance the picture, and to counteract that danger Louis sometimes graded from light to dark on one side and dark to light on the other. Generally, however, such pictures are best when the values of their stripes are mingled and not arranged in any regular pattern. In all the Unfurleds drawing is extremely important, as it is the manipulation of the edges of the stripes—their drawing—that controls not only the shapes of which the composition is made up, but the amount of any individual color put down. As a group, these pictures continue to evidence, in the intensity of their color and the freedom with which that color is disposed, what may be identified as Louis' Expressionist interests of twenty years earlier.

During the last year and a half of his life Louis created the most intense pictures of his career, pictures which once again overturned the pictorial presuppositions of their predecessors. Abandoning the vast central spaces of the Unfurleds and irregular “drawn” paint application, Louis drastically reduced the sizes of his paintings, changed from horizontal formats to vertical ones, and began grouping his color stripes, laid next to one another with the greatest precision, in columns. The amount of raw canvas surrounding these central images is important for the pictures’ success not because it provides space or atmosphere but solely as a matter of proportion, the compositions being tautly conceived across their entire surfaces. Although some of these arrangements of stripes are allowed to run off both ends of the canvas, and some are contained wholly within the canvas, the most successful pictures are those in which only one end is anchored. In both other cases, the scale of the picture or of the image it contains are adversely affected. Louis used ever richer and more brilliant combinations of color in these paintings, combinations relieved only by the introduction of darker values or of mixed hues such as mustard or shades of violet. In some of the best of them he preferred sour color combinations such as yellow, green, and deep blue, abandoning the dramatic beauty of the Unfurleds in favor of a concentrated intensity. Unlike the Unfurleds, they are pictures which make no effort to reach out to the viewer either through striking configurations, sheer size, or what would normally be called attractive color. Yet Louis continued to be the master of his own rich and personal color combinations and his three last paintings exploit that mastery to its fullest. One of these pictures, *Equator*, uses the same format as the other two, a square canvas with its stripes running diagonally near the center and off the edges of the canvas at both ends, but plays a surprising variation foreshadowed by some of the effects of the Unfurleds. Its two groups of diagonal stripes are separated by a band of raw canvas running between them as an exact diagonal—that is, from corner to corner. Although the beholder is usually unaware of the fact, one of the color bands is almost exactly twice the width of the other. An effect of perfect equilibrium is achieved by grouping the dark tonalities in one band and the light in the other, wider band. The result is a picture not only of great beauty but of the focused energy and tautness peculiar to these last works.

Although Louis is often labeled a color field painter, it is clear that what most interested him were not color fields—large areas registering as a single hue in the manner of Rothko or Still—but color balance, differences in hue and value so disposed as to produce perfect equilibrium. Even in his extended exploration of large color areas, the Veils, his hues were not used as fields but as atmospheres, atmospheres that eventually resolved themselves into their various color components. Considered historically, Louis was a bridge between Abstract Expressionism and the less frenetic color explorations of the sixties, his work a microcosm of the passage from dramatic, freely drawn, large-scale canvases to the more contemplative, not always so large, but nonetheless powerful work of the generation after

Abstract Expressionism. The most striking facet of Louis' development as a painter is the extreme rapidity with which he matured. There is a meaningful sense in which it can be said that his most important work was done in the space of two and a half years, and within that time his style and ideas were transformed more than once. Reviewing his development as a painter whose years were spent first in exploration then in consolidation, one realizes how much his early death cut short a promising career. Although Louis was able to explore effects of breadth in the Unfurleds and of depth in his last works, one feels that had he lived both of those styles would have been surpassed in a synthetic style of greater emotional scope than either. Be that as it may, Louis stands as a painter of extraordinary accomplishment and a colorist unique in his time.



JOHN SIMON

Theater Chronicle

ONCE AGAIN, LIKE COUNTLESS TIMES BEFORE, it is the British that rescued our theatrical season. About the best our domestic playwrights could manage is *American Buffalo* by David Mamet, a rather disappointing work from the bright young author of *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* and *Duck Variations*. Here the thirty-one-year-old Mamet gets his first Broadway production, with a full-length play solidly directed by Ulu Grosbard and flawlessly acted by Robert Duvall, Kenneth Macmillan, and John Savage. Jules Fisher has searingly lighted Santo Loquasto's telling junk-shop set: enough extraordinary junk to provide a small museum with a show of both junk sculpture and the art of assemblage. Yet the play never takes us farther than from hither to yon.

The junk-shop owner and two other measly subcriminals are involved in microscopic squabbles and makings-up. The two elder ones plan to rob a coin collection but fail; there is a flare-up of violence in which part of the shop is demolished and the youngest man injured, and then comes some sort of final reconciliation. There may be drug addiction and homosexuality in the background, but this is not made clear. The two main elements are Mamet's apt use of the language of the illiterate or semiliterate, and an evocation of the state of mind of these petty crooks who see themselves as proper businessmen. The latter is supposed to make the play into a grand parable of capitalism and post-Watergate America, but the image is puny, uneventful, and uninvolved, which makes it hard if not impossible to go looking for deeper significance in it. As for the language (e.g., "My shop's fucked up. My whole fucking shop. You fucked my shop up!" "You mad at me?")—well, a good ear is only the foundation of dramaturgy, not its apogee; as for the poetry of scatology and obscenity, it has been of late, like the symbology of Watergate, milked rather dry.

Under close scrutiny, even Mamet's vaunted verbal mastery reveals a certain formulaic quality. "I *am* calm," protests one irate character; "I'm just upset." The same character will exclaim: "The cocksucker should be horsewhipped with a horsewhip!" Or he will explain his technique of breaking in: "If worst comes to worst, you kick in a fucking back door. What do you think this is—the Middle Ages?" Obvious redundancy and equally obvious unawareness that one means the opposite of what one said finally reduce themselves to mechanical devices that usurp other forms of character portrayal. Yet the critics were, for the most part, ecstatic: At last a playwright who uses plain language poetically, they all said, though some also complained of a lack of action. I think that when language is used truly poetically it becomes a legitimate kind of action; the sense of inaction here is proof that the language of *American Buffalo* is not all that poetic. Moreover, though I believe that gutter poetry is possible, it can't

be something that fails to move us intellectually and emotionally, which I take to be the irreducible minimum of art. Instead of moving in either sense of the word, the play just marks time with dumb, nasty, mildly funny verbalizations and petty gripes or flare-ups; gradually, it retreats deeper and deeper under the cover of a sheltering affectlessness.

The British, even at their flimsiest, give us more than that. Their flimsiest (but still exportable) ware is Tom Stoppard's *Dirty Linen*, a short farce incorporating an even shorter one, *New-Found-Land*. This is doubly a *pièce d'occasion*. It was written for Ed Berman's luncheon theater, which meant that it had to be short and simple and easily digestible. But it was also to have an American Bicentennial connection, and Stoppard chose to commemorate his American friend Berman's getting his British naturalization papers. This meant introducing some biographical elements, albeit duly transubstantiated by the author's absurdist turn of mind. So much occasional adjustment required further stretching and thinning Stoppard's already attenuated dramaturgy.

Dirty Linen introduces us to a Parliamentary Committee investigating newspaper charges involving, as it turns out, none other than the delicious Mattie Gotobed, who has just been assigned to the committee as secretary. It soon emerges that she has been involved with all members of the committee but one, and that one *not* the woman member, but a Mr. French, whom she takes on offstage during the inserted play, *New-Found-Land*, after which he too proves docilely amenable to disbanding the committee as Mattie would have it. The whole thing is very much in Stoppard's usual manner of having outrageous fun with language; it would seem that, like Mattie with the M.P.'s, there isn't a single word in the language with which our Tom hasn't had a bit of an illicit romp. I almost believe that his droll plea for the legitimacy of sexual promiscuity is special pleading for his brazen dalliance with every pun, double entendre, and other verbal arabesque he can lay his hands on.

What sets off *Dirty Linen* from Stoppard's recent and more ambitious plays, like *Jumpers* and *Travesties*, is that there is no historical, cultural, philosophical underpinning or superstructure; it is, like *The Real Inspector Hound*, just good, clean—or not-so-good and not-so-clean—fun with very simple concepts, pleasantly painted puppet characters, and occasionally quite sophisticated verbal structures. The simpler word play can be conveyed easily enough. Since *Dirty Linen*, as the very title suggests, is in the tradition of "knickers farce," much of the humor must consist of various undergarments of Miss Gotobed's coming to the fore—either on her body, or in such less likely places as the portfolios of sundry M.P.'s. "What are they doing in there?" the still innocent French will inquire as the committee chairman, Withenshaw, removes a pair of Mattie's panties from among his documents. "It's a brief case," Withenshaw explains. Another committee member will ask the greatly endowed and equally greatly underqualified secretary, "Do you use Gregg's or do you favor the Pitman method?" to which she replies demurely, "I'm on the pill." Or—one last example—"Miss Gotobed, you do speedwriting, I suppose?"

"Yes, if I'm given enough time." Compare this to the Mamet line I quoted, "I *am* calm; I'm just upset." In a sense, they are both examples of *reductio ad absurdum*, but note how much less schematic and simplistic Stoppard's verbal somersault is: it does not go from white (*calm*) to black (*upset*), but from white (*speedwriting*) to, as it were, charcoal gray (*enough time*), which makes for a subtler kind of self-contradiction.

The more elaborate humors of *Dirty Linen*, however, are impossible to reproduce in excerpt form. They comprise things like two M.P.'s conducting a jaded conversation exclusively in Latin or foreign-language phrases; or all committee members, by way of a running verbal gag, drilling the names of restaurants into Mattie—restaurants at which they were seen together, and which she must forget. These names—some French, some English—become a comic, macaronic litany, full of rhymes, assonance, alliteration, and, above all, suggestive paronomasia (e.g., the various restaurants with *Coq* or *Cock* in their names). Individually, these restaurant recitatives may not be much, but woven into the play and crossed with other strands of humor, they become funnier than the sum of their parts.

As for the insert, *New-Found-Land*, it deals with two Home Office functionaries who take over the Committee's room during a recess, to discuss the request for naturalization of an unnamed American (Berman). There are some jokes about that, but most of the play concerns the old civil servant's somewhat senile anecdote about his meeting with Lloyd George—the whole thing a spin-off from the song "My Father Knew Lloyd George"—followed by the young man's lengthy monologue describing an imaginary and quite preposterous journey up and down and across the U.S.A., which proves to be a parody of travel brochures, travelogues, and pop-song and pop-literature clichés about America. Just as the older man was taken in by Lloyd George while thinking he was outwitting him, the younger chap is seduced by America or American propaganda; by implication, Ed Berman's infatuation with England may also be kidded. The monologue, in any case, is quite funny, even if a mite overlong. Then the Committee returns, there is some comic interaction between the characters from the two different plays, and *Dirty Linen* ends with the triumph of Mattie Gotobed's live-and-let-live, screw-and-let-screw philosophy.

Sophomoric stuff, if you look at it very closely and unsympathetically; still, the work of an unusually clever sophomore, and one who, in this play at least, is free from all pretentiousness. To give you one final sample, here is Chairman Withenshaw talking to his committee: "*Withenshaw*: I tell you, if those bloody pandas had got stuck in and produced a cuddly black and white nipper for London Zoo, it wouldn't be *us* in the spotlight—*All*: Hear, hear! *Withenshaw*: Or Mark and Anne for that matter. *Cocklebury-Smythe*: Steady on, Malcolm! *Withenshaw*: I don't mean it would be black and white." A poke at the royal family in the best *Beyond the Fringe* tradition. Ed Berman has directed it all crisply and efficiently, but the American actors have their usual difficulties with sounding British, and

are, some of them, not very funny besides. But Cecilia Hart looks, sounds, and acts Mattie to perfection, and Jacob Brooke is as funny an America-booster as Merwin Goldsmith is a plebeian committee chairman. If you ask nothing much of it, *Dirty Linen* will give you all you want and then some.

A much more ambitious enterprise is *Ashes* by David Rudkin, originally done at the Manhattan Theater Club and then snapped up by Joseph Papp for his Public Theater. Rudkin, an Anglo-Irish playwright, is best known for his first play, *Afore Night Come*, which did not particularly impress me at the Royal Shakespeare. After this initial success, Rudkin went into a kind of slump, and the new play, largely autobiographical, deals with this period, and the efforts of a married couple, based on Rudkin and his wife, to have a child or, at the very least, adopt one. In semi-realistic, semi-stylized fashion, *Ashes* tells about the ludicrous, pitiful, grotesque-pathetic experiences Colin and Anne go through, involving everything from ever more elaborate and painful sexual regimens to having to copulate under medical supervision; and what these things, as well as close probing by various medical personnel, do to their married life. Colin, now a schoolteacher, has had a homosexual phase in his youth (is there a British playwright who hasn't? See below), but this is no barrier between him and Anne, survivors who also come through their various medical humiliations with remarkable tenderness and good cheer.

What almost does upset the applectart, though, is the final difficult pregnancy Anne has, during which Colin must service her complicated needs as best he can, while various dismal omens seem to point to the miscarriage that actually ensues. After that come renewed degrading efforts with adoption agencies that result in failure, too, although here Rudkin may be cheating a little, particularly since in real life the Rudkins were able to adopt children. Then comes something extraneous to the play: a long monologue in which Colin relates a trip back to his family in Northern Ireland for the funeral of an uncle who died in the "troubles," and how Colin, on top of all the other horror, was not even allowed to be a pallbearer, having supposedly become one of the English enemy. Rudkin may, of course, see some relationship between the childlessness and the Irish problem, but he certainly hasn't dramatized it. After a somewhat supererogatory soliloquy in which Anne reaffirms the marriage, the play ends on a note of guarded optimism.

The writing throughout is less than extraordinary but almost always better than banal. Even if, like me, one is not convinced that lack of offspring is such a catastrophe, one is grimly amused and ultimately touched by the comic predicaments and agonizing hope against near-hopelessness between which the couple is buffeted. The nervous short scenes—sometimes mere brief monologues—with which the play lurches ahead are appropriate and often compelling. One actor impersonates a variety of doctors and medical attendants; one actress incarnates all sorts of nurses, adoption-agency staff, and uncomprehending woman friends. In swift brush strokes Rudkin sketches in wildly divergent moods and

situations, all the way from impotent (in both senses) rage to reassertions of devotion; every once in a while he even seems to turn the brush around to jab the canvas with the sharp point of its handle and puncture the painting with a cry of pain. It is all sincere, intelligent, and humane, but somehow lacking in ultimate greatness.

The staging by Lynne Meadow is pointed and unfussy, and the barest hint of scenery by John Lee Beatty works well. The Anne of Roberta Maxwell is fierce or mockingly tender as called for, though the actress's slightly rasping voice becomes at times unduly harsh; the Colin of Brian Murray is appropriately gentle and complaisant, although there are moments when the actor could be more appealing. John Tillinger and Penelope Allen do nicely enough by the many short roles, even if he tends to be a bit cute at times, and she is not the most attractive specimen to have to look at. Because of the angle at which one sees an actress, bad legs can really be quite a problem on stage. All in all, I could not quite escape a certain sense of being preached at by the play, and of watching the raw materials of art rather than art itself.

By far the most interesting of the British imports, and the most convincing contender for best play of the season, is Simon Gray's *Otherwise Engaged*. This strikes me as the only true play of ideas, in which a problem is explored wittily, perspicaciously, and with a lightness of touch allowing the viewer to come to his own conclusions. Simon Hench is in publishing, has a good existence, house, and wife, the last-named temporarily away at Canterbury or Salisbury with some foreign students to whom she teaches English. On his free day, Simon wants to listen to a new recording of *Parsifal* his wife has given him, but people start dropping in. First it is Dave, the bellicose hippie to whom he rents the upstairs flat, and who is always borrowing money or some commodity that might help him seduce a female visitor. Then it is Stephen, Simon's older brother, married to a plain woman and father of a numerous brood, who is sweating out the assistant headmastership at the second-rate public school at which he's been teaching. Next it is Jeff, a blatant literary journalist, who comes to brag about his critical coups, complain about his love life, and drink Simon's liquor. He, in turn, is followed by Davina, a bitchy young woman whom he has just dropped, and who hopes Simon will publish her projected book, which sounds promisingly sensationalistic.

After each of these interruptions Simon keeps reaching for his turntable, but it's no go—there are further interruptions. Now it is a somewhat pathetic slob named Wood, whose daughter applied for a job from Simon and ended up having some office sex with him. It turns out that Wood is really Strapley, a boy who was a couple of years ahead of Simon at school. Simon was then having sex with all the more eligible older boys (since this seems to be yet another vaguely autobiographical play, still another British dramatist appears to be making the standard near-confession), but not with Strapley, who was, as the school parlance had it, a "plop." Simon no more remembers the term than he does Wood-Strapley. Says Wood: "Those of us who were called it are more likely to remember it

than those of you who called us it. [Note how the correct, precise, yet awkward syntax characterizes the speaker.] Plop. Yes, I'm a plop, HENCH. Whom one can now define, after so many years ploppily lived, as a chap who goes straight from masturbation to matrimony to monogamy." It further turns out that Wood's daughter is not his daughter but his chronically unfaithful, almost sadistic mistress, whom he desperately adores and whom, like everything else, he has lost to HENCH and his likes. Simon tries to pacify him, as he has tried with all the interlopers, but Wood, unsatisfied like the others, leaves with murder in his heart and weakness in his mind.

All interrupters, with the possible exception of Davina, are let down by Simon. He gives them a kind of scholarly, almost disembodied, sympathy, sometimes slightly too absent-minded for comfort, sometimes too exactly attentive to details that seem more important to him than the basic problem. Now Stephen returns. He has got the job, which means a secure but tedious life of dancing attendance on the dreary headmaster and his equally dismal wife. At this point, Stephen would like nothing better than for Simon to express his full contempt—for him, for his life, for his work. But again, with maddening politeness, Simon refuses to oblige. Exasperated, Stephen exclaims, "You're just indifferent. Absolutely indifferent!" And what is Simon's reply? "In what sense? As a wine is indifferent, or prepositionally, as in, say, indifferent to—" Stephen hammers away. Will Simon at least admit, as he doubtless tells Jeff and other clever friends, that he considers Stephen and his wife a couple of imbeciles? Comes the answer: "I swear to you, Stephen, I've never told a soul." That is his typical brand of cold comfort: something that, although perhaps not so intended, sounds like an insult. Or the insult may have been very definitely intended, and then cleverly wrapped in ambiguity. In any case, you cannot count on Simon, not even when all you want is a little self-punishment in the form of his scorn.

Next, Dave, the hippie, returns to make further, now quite unreasonable, demands on Simon, who, after an initial justifiable hesitancy, offers to comply. Dave now angrily rejects the offer and accuses Simon of merely doling out charity to feel self-righteously superior. Simon treats him with civilized but cutting irony. Stephen comes back in, and, hurt as he is, blurts out that Simon's wife, Beth, is cheating on him with Ned, a fellow teacher. Beth returns from what was not an outing to a cathedral town but a bit of shacking up in a hotel, and even though Simon would love to pretend he knows nothing (in fact, he always knew that something was going on, but since he had his tactfully discreet little affairs, why shouldn't she?), she insists on having it all out. She wants to run off with Ned, but Simon, with sweet reasonableness, points out that Ned won't break up his marriage for her, and that things can very well go on as they are. Beth furiously quotes Ned at Simon: "He says you are one of those men who can only give permission for little bits of life to get through to you. He says that while we may envy you your serenity, we should be revolted by the rot from which it stems. Your sanity is of the kind that causes people to go quietly mad around you."

Much of this is provoked by Simon's long speech in which he states his credo. It begins: "... The worst thing you can do to an important problem is to discuss it ... This whole business of noncommunication is one of the more poignant fallacies of our zestfully overexplanatory age ... " Finally Beth plays her trump card: she is about to have a baby that may be either Simon's or Ned's. This temporarily stuns Simon, and as Beth goes out, Dave comes in to hurl further unpleasantnesses at him. Then Simon turns on his telephone-answering machine and gets more reproaches from Wood-Strapley, who actually describes his own suicide on the tape—which Simon turns off before the shot is heard. Now Jeff comes back dejected by further setbacks with the traffic police sicced on him by Davina. Simon, however, will now play his *Parsifal* come hell or high water; surprisingly, it turns out that Jeff doesn't mind, in fact, it was he who years ago introduced Simon to Wagner. "Then I owe you more than I can say," says Simon turning on the music.

This outline, though possibly overlong, does justice neither to the wit nor to the seriousness of *Otherwise Engaged*. To begin with, this is the first play out of contemporary England that conveys the sense of civilized defeat, of urbane despair, that seems to have gripped many of the country's finer minds. The music Simon listens to may well be the passive equivalent of what was once thought of as the dance on top of the volcano: a dirge heard as one sinks into oblivion. Parsifal's purity was one of involvement; Simon's comes out of uninvolvedness, a detachment that may conceivably justify his wife's question, "Do you want to live at all?" Let us not forget that Jeff, who is such a coarsely overactive, fame-and-woman-chasing fellow, is also about to share in four hours of listening, which here becomes the symbol of much more than four hours. And this same Jeff, while confessing to a crazy adultery he is engaged in with his remarried ex-wife (whom he had discarded for, among other things, her stupidity, but whom he now loves and, occasionally, even thinks he *likes*!), admits that he is happiest not during his illicit trysts, but in his car, driving to or from those trysts and "dreaming—dreaming of what's past or is to come."¹ And Jeff elaborates on the characteristics that he considers make him English to his "marrow's marrow": the joy of being "wrapped in the anticipation or the memory, no, the anticipation *of* the memory." In a way, Jeff almost out-Simons Simon.

Otherwise Engaged is a problem play in the best sense: both Simon and his satellites are right in their own ways; and both, in their various manners, are also wrong. The quietism Simon aspires to is based on many virtues: discretion, tolerance, circumspection, civilizedness, generosity with one's worldly goods, at least superficial sympathy for others, and genuine sophistication. But there is also an evasiveness, a basic uncommittedness either to others or even to one's own emotional potential, as well as a certain academicism—even cynicism—mixed in with one's wisdom. And what about those others? Some of them are selfish and importu-

¹ The allusion to Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" is unmistakable—to that mechanical nightingale that sings to the jaded nobles "Of what is past, or passing, or to come."

nate, uncivilized and exploitative. Others among them are modest and self-sacrificing, but with that irritating other side of martyrs: demanding to be victimized, glorying in it, and not above turning on those they have set up above themselves. They bite the hand they have asked to scourge them.

That the work is a true problem play and that the author has not cheated is apparent from the fact that most people I have talked to either loathe Simon and feel sorry for the others, or love Simon and are aghast at the obnoxiousness of the others who rob him of his repose. We can certainly read or see the play either way, or go even farther, and perceive all the characters as both ridiculous and touching, as worthy of laughter as of compassion. It is as if this seemingly fragile and frothy play contained shimmering layers of ambiguity all the way to infinity whither its implications stretch. What, for instance, does Jeff mean when he says to Simon: "What I want from you is an attentive face and a cocked ear, the good old-fashioned sympathy for which you're celebrated, O bloody K?" The tone here is complex: it is a plea for sympathy, but it is also a taunt, an acknowledgment that the sympathy disbursed will be counterfeit. Yet there is also a deeper implication—that all sympathy is really spurious: merely an attentive face and cocked ear, and not full, unselfish involvement, and perhaps not needed all that much to begin with, as the nonchalant "O bloody K" would seem to imply. Yet something about Jeff's boozing and braggadocio also suggests a lost soul, so that the sarcasm may be, after all, a disguised cry for help.

Let me illustrate how the playwright's humor works with three examples. Wood bemoans the fact that "little Hench," also known at school as "the tart of Wundale," should have had such an unjustly easy time of it, and exclaims: "If life catches up with everybody at the end, why hasn't it with you?" Simon replies: "But I haven't got to the end yet, thank God. I'm sure it will eventually." We note first the exaggerated thirst for retribution on the part of the man who feels cheated by life; then the flippant cynicism of the *bon vivant* in jocular word play. But on closer examination there is a sensibleness in both positions: by now, from a certain standpoint, Simon should have had to pay his dues; from another point of view, why shouldn't the "end" be much later, when all men have to die? This is more than a sally or riposte: it is two world views encapsulated in a piece of repartee. Or consider Stephen's response to his brother's inquiry about how the nut cutlets from Headmaster's wife's recipe tasted (at other times, Stephen is obliged to drink Headmaster's equally loathsome pansy wine): "Rather disgusting. But she's going to give us some more recipes if we like this one. Perhaps they'll be better." This is brilliant. Stephen has hated every bit of food and drink that has come from the superiors he must play up to, yet he has so adapted to the toadying that he does not even notice the contradiction between "rather disgusting" and "if we like this one." And, in the teeth of all previous experience, he still hopes for a miracle with the next recipe. This is character in action: wit as a functional element, not just decoration.

Lastly, consider the way Stephen apologizes for having told Simon about Beth's infidelity: "Yes, well, I suppose I meant to hurt, but I didn't mean harm, if you see." Superficially, this too may look like the Mamet character's "I *am* calm; I'm just upset." But it is not only stupid self-contradiction—self-unawareness or self-delusion. It is an attempt to justify one's spite by some pitiful casuistry, as if there were something better about *hurt* than about *harm*, some extenuating distinction, and then dumping the burden of figuring out the imaginary difference on the other person with that "if you see"—which, by the way, is equally disingenuous as the "well, I suppose," which was meant to suggest a concession based on mature reflection, but was no such thing. This is language used in true dramatic form: as revelation of character, determinant of relationships, and carrier of action.

Harold Pinter has directed ably, bringing out the latent tensions and hostilities through the orchestration of pitch, emphasis, and silence of which he is the master. Altogether, he strikes me as more interesting as a director than as a playwright, though it must be conceded that this play is particularly suited to the Pinter treatment. The acting is quite good for a mostly American cast in British roles, though, significantly, the best work comes from the English Tom Courtenay as Simon, and the Canadian John Horton as Stephen.

There is no need to dwell on *Sly Fox*, a successful but meretricious updating and Americanization of what Clive Barnes, in a column from San Francisco, referred to as "Marlowe's *Volpone*." Larry Gelbart has supplied it with a fair number of clever one-liners, and George C. Scott and a number of zanies are afforded some amusing comic turns—no more and no less. Had I more space, I would have, however, gone into *Comedians* by Trevor Griffiths, another interesting English play, but ultimately a failure: an attempt to couch certain profound political and artistic antinomies in terms of different approaches to comedy among some fledgling and some more experienced, stand-up comics. The metaphor proves too slender to carry the philosophical burden loaded onto it. I must conclude briefly, though, with what I consider this year's theatrical scandal, no season being free of at least one or two of these.

I am referring to Andrei Serban's production of *The Cherry Orchard* for Joseph Papp in Lincoln Center's large Vivian Beaumont theater. Serban is a Rumanian avant-gardist who has found a welcoming home at Ellen Stewart's La Mama, where he both works and lives. He has been playing there the usual avant-garde games with a number of classic plays, notably in weird productions of *Medea*, *Electra*, and *The Trojan Women*, which, without any justification, he calls "Euripides' Trilogy." Having made hash of Brecht and Shakespeare as well, he was invited by Irene Worth to do this Chekhov for her.

Serban is the kind of director who does not ask, "What is this play about?" but "What can *I* do with this play?" Accordingly, the ancestral house becomes an empty stage covered with a white cloth on which a few sticks of furniture are strewn about. A scrim reveals, from time to time, a

complete cherry orchard beyond this, with rows on rows of somewhat puny cherry trees. When Ranevskaya talks about her drowned son, this drowning is enacted by walk-ons in the orchard; at other times we see Russian history—past, present, and future—file past us in this area: rows of bent-over serfs pulling a gigantic plow, or a factory lighting up with numerous chimney stacks. Down front, everything is played for farce: Lopakhin continually bellows his warnings right into Ranevskaya's ear, and, when angry, smashes all the furniture he can lay his hands on. Yasha and Dunyasha are played as arrogant middle-class Americans of today, and treat their masters as equals, at best; Ranevskaya, in fact, is the peasantiest character on stage. Charlotte is a total madwoman; Firs is a mincing little flit, hopping and skipping about in archaic lackey costume, singing odd little ditties in his comic top hat, and, in the end, assuming a yoga position while a symbolic little girl comes waltzing in with a few cherry sprigs in bloom.

Pratfalls are everywhere. Dunyasha does a near-striptease and runs about with her panties around her ankles (a knickers farce?); when Firs wants to put the overcoat on Gayev, this becomes a lengthy chase around a bench. The ball scene is a surreal ballet with the dancers freezing from time to time; at other times in the play we are treated to slow-motion. Something sexual seems to be going on between Ranevskaya and Petya, who is represented as an ominous figure, black and threatening. Ranevskaya bids farewell to her house by running around in circles several times on an empty stage, and panting as in orgasm while she does so. Petya's galoshes come flying out of the wings; Gayev jumps up on a hobby-horse while making a speech—characters are constantly mounting the furniture. Charlotte wears clown makeup much of the time; asides are spoken right into people's faces. Dunyasha and Yasha roll off their bench and across the floor; because there is no scenery on stage, Act IV has to begin with people bringing furniture on (to be carried off later), so that it looks like people moving in, not out. The sale of the orchard is announced by Anya as she dances in as part of one couple to her mother who is dancing by as part of another; while praying for help, Varya keeps banging her head against the arm of the sofa. Firs chants things like "Nincompoop—poop—poop," and so on ad nauseam.

Jean-Claude Van Itallie has translated without any knowledge of Russian, sometimes more or less, copying existing translations, and sometimes modernizing inauspiciously or inaccurately. Sometimes he even tries to do both at once, as when Epikhodov, who in Chekhov is nicknamed "Twenty-two misfortunes," becomes "Twenty-two disasters" but promptly reverts to "Twenty-two misfortunes." Then back again to "disasters." Disaster, certainly, is the word for the performances, some more disastrous than others, under Serban's absurd direction. In any case, there is no ensemble acting whatever, discrepancies ranging from Raul Julia's Puerto Rican bumpkin of a Lopakhin to Priscilla Smith's inaudible Varya (she comes from the nonverbal theater of Serban and Schechner); from the ample British style of Irene Worth (grand even when

directorially undermined) to the petty sniveling of George Voskovec as her brother—unlikely family! Max Wright's Epihodov and Meryl Streep's Dunyasha are out of some third-rate vaudeville number; Ben Masters turns Yasha into a contemporary male model of dubious sexuality; Dwight Marfield's Firs is a sort of campy off-Broadway musical-comedy act. And so on down the line except for C. K. Alexander's Pischik, who at least suggests Russianness.

But if this is depressing enough, more depressing yet was the critical reception, *The New York Times* alone printing three separate raves by Clive Barnes, Walter Kerr, and Richard Eder, who was just designated as Barnes' successor (*plus ça change . . .*), which may be a first and is surely a new low. With criticism like that, no wonder we get the theater we have. Eder, by the way, has demonstrated his qualification for the new job by writing that Serban's next production for Papp will be "Sophocles' *Agamemnon*." When I pointed out to him that we had *Agamemnons* only from Aeschylus and Seneca, he proceeded to blame the typesetter for everything. Maybe what passes for drama criticism in the *Times* is all typos.

At the
**University of
Connecticut's**

Fourteenth Annual
Wallace Stevens Program
on April 6

RICHARD WILBUR read from
his own poems and awarded
prizes to student winners of
the poetry contest:

First Prize
DEBORAH CRAMER and
ALEX SMITH

Second Prize
ROBERT CALALUCE and
SUSAN RALPH JACKMAN

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Reviews

MARVIN MUDRICK

The Entertainer

BOSWELL NEVER RAN OUT OF QUESTIONS, but Johnson occasionally ran out of patience: "I will not be put to the *question*. Don't you consider, Sir, that these are not the manners of a gentleman? I will not be baited with *what*, and *why*; what is this? what is that? why is a cow's tail long? why is a fox's tail bushy?"¹ Boswell was no gentleman, he had questions which hardly anybody except a child would think of asking or even think of, questions which, if Johnson sulked, only God Almighty would be competent to answer. (Johnson, if he could be got to answer, was for all practical purposes God: "I must really," Boswell mused in his journal after a depressing session with a clergyman on the question of original sin, "get Mr. Johnson to put me down a short, clear system of religion." Or: "Mr. Wood raved ignorantly about the uncertainty of the soul's being immortal or immaterial. But I had not arguments ready to silence him. I must get a *summary* from Mr. Johnson.") When Boswell visited his brother who had gone mad, what shocked him most about the change was its unbounded and self-evident questionableness: "I could not conceive *how* he did not talk as usual." (God will not be baited with *how* and *what* and *why*.) Worse, Boswell had a child's helpless apprehension that the answers whenever they came and wherever they came from wouldn't necessarily be reassuring:

At night after we were in bed, [his six-year-old daughter] Veronica spoke out from her little bed and said, "I do not beleive there is a GOD." "Preserve me," said I, "my dear, what do you mean?" She answered, "I have *thinket* it many a time, but did not like to speak of it." I was confounded and uneasy, and tried her with the simple Argument that without GOD there would not be all the things we see. It is He who makes the sun shine. Said She: "It shines only on good days." Said I: "GOD made you." Said she: "My Mother bore me." It was a strange and alarming thing to her Mother and me to hear our little Angel talk thus. . . . [The next day] By talking calmly with Veronica, I discovered what had made her think there was not a GOD. She told me, "She did not like to die." I suppose as She had been told that GOD takes us to himself when we die, she had fancied that if there were no GOD, there

¹ After one such occasion, Boswell recorded in his journal that "Langton told me . . . [Johnson] said when they were in the coach, 'When Boswell gets wine, his conversation consists all of questions.'"

would be no death. . . . I impressed upon her that we must die at any rate; and how terrible it would be if we had not a Father in Heaven to take care of us. . . .

Out of the mouths of babes, and months afterward the implacable voice was still carrying on—"The children said divine lessons in the evening. But some bad fit had seised Veronica, for she said to me in a kind of plaintive, upbraiding tone, 'I am not to go up to Heaven. I am just to rot.' "

Ask a childish question, get a childish answer. As a boy, Boswell was "subject to fits of depression, and in his seventeenth year suffered a protracted illness that sounds like a nervous collapse."² At nineteen, imagining that the Church Universal was the answer, he ran away from Presbyterian Scotland (away from his unsympathetic father and—as he would cry out in exasperation years later—"the narrowness of this damned country") to London, where he made his submission to Roman Catholicism and considered entering a monastery in France. But his father appealed in the nick of time to an Ayrshire neighbor, a Scottish lord then living in London, who rescued Boswell for posterity by initiating him into the metropolitan pleasures and opportunities that during the rest of his life would have the power to divert him intermittently from "the gloomy ground"³ of his mind. (But at any time in his life he could be knocked flat in a moment:

My affliction was a kind of *faintness of mind*, a total indifference as to all objects of whatever kind, united with a melancholy dejection. I saw death so staringly waiting for all the human race, and had such a cloudy and dark prospect beyond it, that I was miserable as far as I had animation. Either this morning or yesterday I awaked in terrible melancholy. I found however immediate relief by instantaneously praying to GOD with earnestness; and I felt the comfort of piety. I absolutely was reduced to so wretched a state by my mental disease that I had right and wrong and every distinction confounded in my view. I loved my wife with extraordinary affection, but I had distinctly before me the time which *must* come when we shall be separated by death. I was fond of my children. But I unhappily saw beyond them; saw the time when they too shall be dead, and seeing that, I could not value them properly at present.)

Boswell was a very limited man: how can we not be sure since he so often tells us? He talked about his shortcomings freely, not only in his

² Frederick A. Pottle, "Introduction" to *Boswell's London Journal* (New York, 1959), p. 3.

³ "Such is the gloomy ground of my mind, that any agreeable perceptions have an uncommon though but a momentary brightness." Letter to William Johnson Temple: 28, 30 November 1789. THE CORRESPONDENCE AND OTHER PAPERS OF JAMES BOSWELL RELATING TO THE MAKING OF THE *LIFE OF JOHNSON*, edited with an Introduction and Notes by Marshall Waingrow. McGraw-Hill. \$20.00.

journals but in letters to friends, who concluded that doubtless anybody who volunteered thoughtful and exact accounts of his own shortcomings must be a fool. "I always remember Sir John Pringle's saying to me some years ago in London, 'You know nothing.' And now the remark is as just as then. There is an imperfection, a superficialness, in all my notions. I understand nothing clearly, nothing to the bottom." "My misery is that . . . I am convinced by the last book which I have read. I have a horror at myself for doubting thus." "I am too concave a being. My thoughts go inwards too much instead of being carried out to external objects. I wish I had a more convex mind. And yet the happiness of a rational being is reflection. But I am too minute." Sometimes the self-depreciation had a pathetic little plume of vanity stuck into the end of it: "I am not a great man, but I have an enthusiastic love of great men, and I derive a kind of glory from it"; "I find myself an amiable, pretty man of moderate abilities, but a soul truly noble." He could never resist self-revelation ("I have a kind of strange feeling as if I wished nothing to be secret that concerns myself. This is a weakness to be corrected"), though Johnson "cautioned me against too much openness. 'A man,' said he, 'should never tell tales of himself. People may appear to laugh and be entertained, but they treasure them up, and bring them out against him.' " The result is that Boswell has persuaded just about everybody that he didn't have the brains or gumption or moral awareness to put together the *Life of Johnson* except as the all-time fluke of luck and circumstance.

So a stuffed prune of a biographer as late as 1932 could summarize Boswell in terms appropriate to a character sketch of Frank Harris by Queen Victoria:

. . . he is not to be regarded as a great man or as a figure of profound significance. . . . If Johnson had not taken a liking to him, it is doubtful if we should have remembered Boswell at all. . . . The sordid particulars which are revealed by his private journals can only be of legitimate interest if they are studied as data of a purely relative importance. Whether the ample and elaborate presentation of such data can be justified, or whether they ought not to have been preserved in the decent obscurity of private archives, if it was desirable to preserve them at all, are matters for doubt; but we are grateful to Colonel Isham for presenting them in a form that places them for ever beyond the reach of a wide, curious and indiscriminating public.⁴

No doubt about it, among the journals' thousands of pages of brilliant evocation and unfailingly fresh and personal reflection over a range of encounters with hundreds of the most interesting people in England and

⁴C. E. Vulliamy, *James Boswell* (London, 1932), pp. 210-211. "For ever" is quite a while though, and the journals (which were first published between 1928 and 1934 in a collectors' edition "for ever beyond the reach" of human beings) have been coming out in a popular edition since 1950, when the first volume—the *London Journal*—was issued with best-seller success.

Scotland and various nations of the Continent, Boswell doesn't spare the sordid particulars of what he accurately called his "rage" for whoring and drinking and all-night card-playing—

About one in the morning I sent a note to my wife by Joseph, who had found me out, told her I was sober, and hoped she would go to bed; and then I indulged my love of gaming, and insensibly resolved to make a night of it.

About seven in the morning my clerk, Mr. Lawrie, came and found us sitting like wizards. He told me that my wife had been up all night and was quite miserable. This shocked me. I thought, however, that it was in vain to go home now, but that I would play on till within a little of nine, when I was obliged to be in the Parliament House, having fifteen causes in the rolls, as Mr. Lawrie mentioned with much earnestness. He had the dismal look of a faithful servant who saw his master doing what was quite wrong. . . . If the Court had not been sitting, I believe we should have played on all day, for I was not at all saturated with gaming. . . .

(But who else would have noticed from the outside himself as well as the others, cards in hand, in their tranced hieratic pose around the table after a sleepless night among the knaves and deuces "sitting like wizards"?)

I madly drank a bottle of claret by myself, none of them drinking with me, and this, meeting what I had taken at dinner, made me brutally feverish. So I sallied to the Park again, and again dallied. But, what was worse, as I was coming home to General Paoli's, I was picked up by a strumpet at the head of St. James's Street, who went with me to the entry to the passage from Hay Hill by Lord Shelburne's, and in my drunken venturousness, I lay with her. Oh, what a sad apprehension then seized me! I got home between three and four, or a little earlier.

SATURDAY 30 MARCH. Awaked very ill with sickness and headache; wished to conceal my illness, or rather the cause of it. Got up at ten. The General discovered it, and genteelly reprov'd my drunkenness as a vice which hurts the character, and gives envious people an advantage over a man of parts. . . .

(But what other drunkard was so beloved of two great men as Boswell, about whose drinking Paoli, the hero of Corsica, conferred anxiously with Johnson? One evening Boswell turned up "sadly in liquor" at the Club and not only went out of his way to insult Johnson but "harangued" Charles James Fox, who "did not like my vinous compliments, and went to another part of the table from that where I sat"; next day, meeting Johnson, Boswell expected thunder and lightning but received only a mild rebuke; when later Johnson was asked what Boswell had said to make amends, he replied, "Sir, he said all that a man should say. He said he was sorry.")

Because Boswell had a talent for persuading even his friends that—good-hearted and well-meaning as he was—he was obviously too shallow, irresponsible, indolent, injudicious, self-doubting, vain, and silly ever to accomplish anything valuable, they awaited the publication of the *Life of Johnson* with skepticism and something like embarrassment (yet his *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* had appeared years earlier, and ought to have demonstrated to everybody his mastery of the method and the subject). Lord Hailes, a family friend and lifelong confidant of Boswell's, wrote when the *Life* was already in press to warn him against including Johnsonian trivia and—so easy was it to feel free to treat him like an idiot child—against featuring himself as the hero!

Your work will, I doubt not, be very entertaining, but I am afraid that your admiration of your friend may lead you to be too minute and to record *dicta* of little moment. I hope that you have observed an advice which I once gave, namely to remember that Dr. J. is the principal figure in the piece. . . .

William Johnson Temple, Boswell's closest friend from boyhood, merely gaped in disbelief: "Have you the vanity to think your Biography preferable to Mason's [*Life of Gray*]?" (Boswell's answer must have seemed quite lunatic to Temple: "I am absolutely certain that *my* mode of Biography which gives not only a *History* of Johnson's *visible* progress through the World and of his Publications, but a *View* of his mind, in his Letters, and Conversations is the most perfect that can be conceived, and will be *more* of a *Life* than any Work that has ever yet appeared.") Once the *Life* was published, fellow members of the Club like Burke and Bishop Percy were confirmed in their opinion that, though it was of course "entertaining" (the correct word that many who wished to disregard the book's originality and magnitude used as a sneer; but Boswell himself had written exultantly to Langton just before publication, "It will be the most entertaining Book that ever appeared"), though he might manage to amuse them, for gentlemen the decisive fact about Boswell was that he was no gentleman and couldn't be trusted in the same room with gentlemen. Burke was one of many who took offense at Boswell's "practice of recording and publishing private conversation"⁵: questioned by Boswell about his reaction to the *Life*, he replied in an ignoble letter that damned with faint praise and ended by asseverating that "many particulars there related might as well have been omitted." Boswell's particulars, sordid or not, have a tendency to wrinkle the noses of stuffed prunes.

"As to the conversation I had the honour of having with the King at his Levee with regard to your Work and to Johnson," sniffed Burke in the same letter, "I gave you the account of it with as much exactness at the time, as I am able ever to relate any thing; not being much in the habit of

⁵ Letter from Sir William Scott: 2 August 1791 (Note 1). THE CORRESPONDENCE OF JAMES BOSWELL WITH CERTAIN MEMBERS OF THE CLUB, edited with an Introduction and Notes by Charles N. Fifer. McGraw-Hill. \$30.00.

precision with regard to particular expressions." Gentlemen take their stand by ideas and convictions and meanings, of which words are only more or less temporary receptacles. But Boswell has the habit of precision, he demands the words themselves, the very body of the temporary and unpredictable and irresponsible:

I talked of Sheridan's saying and persisting to say that Dr. Johnson had a black heart because Dr. Johnson had said, "If they have given him a pension, it is time for me to give up mine." He said Macpherson had told this to Sheridan, for there were none present but he and Mr. and Mrs. Strahan, at whose house it was said. But that the half of what passed only was told, for he added, "I am glad he has got a pension, for he is a very good man." And he said now to me, "I'll tell Sheridan so when I see him. But supposing I had not added this, how absurd is it in a man to load the saying with a black heart. It accused him of nothing. It was what everybody will at a time say of everybody in a fit of frowardness or bad humour."

Johnson is comfortable with Boswell because Johnson isn't a gentleman either, he is always answering for his life in the full tide of his feelings, what he says at the moment is not only what he feels but what he is, even his apologies are affirmations. Boswell's Johnson is the word made flesh (too too solid and maybe sullied for the likes of Burke and Percy), an extemporaneous man talking himself into the thick of every occasion (in a world of occasions if nothing else), and therefore no monument but all that can be saved of a man alive in the pages of a book.

A few months after Johnson's death Boswell had an exchange of his own with the King at his Levee, who said, "I believe you knew him more intimately than any Man"; and Boswell replied, "He was very good to me, Sir. And I was very forward with him." The only life ever written is Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, because only Johnson lived so fully in unpremeditated words and only Boswell, besides being so forward in provoking so many of them, had the genius, the love, the attentiveness, the perseverance, and the opportunity to gather so very many of them in. Boswell must have been pleased that at least one member of the Club and an old friend of Johnson's, Dr. Burney, understood immediately and prophetically what he had done:

... it is impossible to open either of your two Volumes without finding some sentiment of our venerable Sage worth remembering. His wit and his wisdom are equally original and impressive; and I have no doubt but that both will become proverbial to Englishmen, and long continue to direct their taste as well as morals. For my own part, I think myself infinitely obliged to you for embalming so many of his genuine sentiments which are not to be found in his works. Indeed if all his writings which had been previously printed were lost, or had never appeared, your book would have conveyed to posterity as advantageous an Idea of

his Character, genius, and worth as Xenophon has done of those of Socrates. . . .

(In fact Johnson's conversation was the whole man, livelier and more characteristic than his writing, as only Boswell at the time could dare to think. In the journals Boswell notes that he asked Johnson's opinion on a legal case he was engaged in, about which Johnson first talked freely and then dictated a statement: Boswell concludes with the comment, "I could perceive that what he threw out upon the subject in conversation was stronger and had more fire than what he dictated." But even Boswell couldn't make public such heresy, and his comment is omitted from the account as it appears in the *Life*.⁶) And Boswell was delighted (his letter in response to Elford has survived) by a really champion fan letter from a man he didn't know, William Elford, Fellow of the Royal Society, devout admirer of Johnson:

This kind of Biography appears to me perfectly new, and of all others the most excellent—it constitutes a fund of the highest intellectual entertainment, by giving the portrait of the mind of perhaps the greatest man the world has produc'd—enlivened with anecdotes, and conversations of most of the great literary characters of his time—and as these works of Yours [he includes, quite rightly, the *Tour of the Hebrides*] are, I believe the first of their kind, so it will be long before Your example will be follow'd, for Your plan requir'd not only great Ability, and Capacity of selection, but a degree of labour and attention which very few persons will be found willing to submit to. In short instead of describing Your characters, You exhibit them to the Reader. He finds himself in their Company, and becomes an Auditor of Conversations, which have all the dignity of the best moral writings, soften'd by the ease, the wit and the familiarity of Colloquial manners.

So when Burke frowned and turned aside or Sir William Scott invited him to a party with the admonition, "no Letter Press upon the Occasion!"

⁶ In the anecdote about Sheridan, quoted above as it appears in the journals, Boswell omitted from its transcription into the *Life* Johnson's entire last statement, beginning "I'll tell Sheridan so . . ."—much the best part, indeed the *point*, of the anecdote—and there are other regrettable and often inexplicable omissions as Boswell mines the journals for Johnsoniana to be used in the *Life*. One nerve-racking anecdote that the journals preserve but that it isn't hard to make out why Boswell decided against including in the *Life*—he disliked calling attention to Johnson's convulsive mannerisms—takes place at Beauclerk's:

. . . after dinner Mr. Johnson rose and walked to the end of the room in a fit of meditation and threw himself into some of those attitudes which he does when deep in thought. [Captain] Brodie, who knew nothing of his character but was just a jolly sea-officer, a blunt tar who wished to put the bottle about and did not like to see a man who did not drink as the rest of the company did, turned to Mr. Johnson and said, "Sir, if you be for dancing a minuet, had not you better go to the ladies?" Brodie had no bad intention. But it may be well conceived what a shocking speech this was to the majestic Rambler. A dreadful explosion was to be expected. Mr. Johnson took no notice whatever of the speech for a good while. At last he came and sat down, and all at once turning to Mr. Beauclerk, said, "Don't you think this Brodie a very coarse fellow?" [Presumably Brodie was at the moment out of earshot, because Boswell mentions nothing further.]

Boswell, fortified by such appreciations as Burney's and Elford's, could confidently elucidate the difference between a scandal sheet and the greatest biography ever written:

If others, as well as myself, sometimes appear as shades to the Great Intellectual Light, I beg to be fairly understood, and that you [Scott] and my other friends will inculcate upon persons of timidity and reserve, that my recording the conversations of so extraordinary a man as Johnson with its concomitant circumstances, was a *peculiar* undertaking, attended with much anxiety and labour, and that the conversations of people in general are by no means of that nature as to bear being registered and that the task of doing it would be exceedingly irksome to me. . . .

Boswell had a special license to strike back at his touchy friends—so fearful of being reduced to shades and contexts—because the sole important figure in the *Life* who may be said to be misrepresented is Boswell himself. Certainly, having only the *Life* to go by (the journals had another century to wait before being turned up at Malahide Castle), early critics like Croker and Macaulay could find Boswell pushy and light-minded, the indefatigable interlocutor and snoop, too ready to appear as shade to the Great Intellectual Light, less fond of the man Johnson than of the perfect target for an upstart's literary ambition; and it may be that the warnings of his editorial associate, Edmond Malone, and of friends like Lord Hailes, against admitting evidences of his personal vanity into the *Life* had the effect of persuading him to delete more of himself and of his intimacy with Johnson than the plan of the work required.

In any case the journals make clear Boswell's uninterrupted and virtually religious devotion to Johnson from the day they met until his own death thirty-two years later. "I am never with this great man without feeling myself bettered and rendered happier," he noted a few weeks after their first meeting. Away from Johnson for two and a half years during his studies and travels on the Continent, subjected and susceptible to every kind of distraction, in his own grandiose phrase a man "of wavering faith and strong passions" (by the last two words Boswell meant his hair-trigger horniness⁷), at a most impressionable age (when he left England he

⁷ Which was a question he seems never to have been able to bring up frankly with Johnson. Still, he was eager to hear Johnson's opinion on an occasion when Johnson cautiously mentioned "the mechanical reason" for marriage: said Boswell, "But imagination makes it much more important than it is in reality. It is . . . a delusion in us as well as in women." "Yes, Sir," said he, "and a delusion that is always beginning again." This was admirably observed. I said I imagined there was more evil than good produced by that appetite. He said, 'I don't think so.' I must hear him more fully upon this." When Boswell transcribed this exchange from the journals to the *Life*, he did some tidying (changed his own first sentence from declarative to interrogative, changed "and" before Johnson's "a delusion" to "but," dropped his own approving comment, tacked a "Sir" on at the end of Johnson's last statement); censored "appetite" into "passion"; and deleted the altogether personal last sentence. Johnson's startlingly unconventional and generous "I don't think so" comes very near absolving Boswell, for the moment, of his sense of guilt. But Boswell never did hear Johnson more fully on the question.

was twenty-two and had known Johnson less than three months), a vain and gregarious young man living among cultivated Europeans who had never heard of his idol and so could hardly make sense of his devotion, he continued notwithstanding to regard Johnson as the pole star of his existence, the greatest and best of men, the sovereign palliative if not cure for his melancholy, the beloved and steadfast comforter and counselor.

Yet what, after Boswell's heroic omissions of evidence in the *Life*, shows up most brightly and most surprisingly in the journals is Johnson's love of Boswell. When Boswell returned from the Continent and came to see Johnson, "he hugged me to him like a sack, and grumbled, 'I hope we shall pass many years of regard.'" (In the *Life*: "He received me with much kindness.") On a visit to London two years later, he found Johnson gone to Oxford and traveled there to meet him: "He took me all in his arms and kissed me on both sides of the head, and was as cordial as ever I saw him. . . . I told him I was settled as a lawyer and how I had made two hundred pounds by the law this year. He grumbled and laughed and was wonderfully pleased. 'What, Bozzy? Two hundred pounds! A great deal.'" (Not a word or gesture of this greeting survives in the *Life*.) On a later visit: "He seemed happier to see me than ever. He said, 'I do love thee. I do love thee'; and when I left him he said, 'Good-night, dear Sir. I am glad to see you again, very glad to see you again.'" (In the *Life*: "I am glad you are come. . . .") Writing to Lord Kames a year after his introduction to Johnson, Boswell called it "the happiest incident of my life"; but the mutuality was explicit when, a decade later, Boswell recalled that Johnson "said to me at Edinburgh, before Dr. Blair and some more, that he reckoned the day on which he and I became acquainted one of the happiest days in his life." And, after fifteen years of intimacy, they were able to acknowledge to each other in all the complacency of love how well they went together:

Dr. Johnson said, "You make yourself agreeable wherever you go. Whoever has seen you once wishes to see you again." BOSWELL: "That is a very pleasing circumstance, Sir." JOHNSON: "Yes, Sir, very pleasing indeed." BOSWELL: "You and I do quite well to travel together. The composition just fits. I love to be under some restraint, some awe, and you're as easy with me as with anybody."

These characteristic facts and instances appear in the journals, and none of them is transcribed into the *Tour of the Hebrides* or the *Life*. Boswell must have been drawn or driven to the conclusion that omitting them was necessary because nothing is less entertaining and more ungentlemanly than love.

DAVID BROMWICH

Verse Chronicle

ELIZABETH BISHOP'S POISE IS A QUIET MARVEL.¹ No scouting of the terrain, no "minor poet's cough," no preliminary display of wares: she enters a poem as few of us can enter a house.

It was cold and windy, scarcely the day
to take a walk on that long beach.
Everything was withdrawn as far as possible,
indrawn: the tide far out, the ocean shrunken,
seabirds in ones or twos.
The rackety, icy, offshore wind
numbed our faces on one side;
disrupted the formation
of a lone flight of Canada geese;
and blew back the low, inaudible rollers
in upright, steely mist.

The sky was darker than the water
—*it* was the color of mutton-fat jade.
Along the wet sand, in rubber boots, we followed
a track of big dog-prints (so big
they were more like lion-prints). Then we came on
lengths and lengths, endless, of wet white string,
looping up to the tide-line, down to the water,
over and over. Finally, they did end:
a thick white snarl, man-size, awash,
rising on every wave, a sodden ghost,
falling back, sodden, giving up the ghost . . .
A kite string?—But no kite.

The walk happens at a time when the landscape and the weather have grown heavy with their own weight. They mean something, yet their meaning is engraved in a language not quite familiar, and untranslatable. Things have to be named twice for us to be sure of them: not the ocean alone, but the shape of every single thing, is "withdrawn as far as possible,/ indrawn"; the dog-prints, "so big/ they were more like lion-prints," trick us off our balance; *it*—the sky or the water?—is "the color of mutton-fat jade," a color we can imagine but not easily remember; the sound of the "low, inaudible rollers" is ever-present in the movement of the verse itself. Miss Bishop confides in us, tells us every patient and

¹ GEOGRAPHY III, by *Elizabeth Bishop*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. \$7.95.

absorbing detail, we are not sure why. This is her characteristic strategy at the start of a poem, often her *apparent* strategy throughout a poem. And we are absorbed.

She imagines retreating to a shingled cabin, a "proto-dream-house," farther along the beach. This is her heterocosm: a second nature that happily does not mirror the first. It is the sort of house where—in an earlier poem, "The Bight"—she could turn up a gas flame as low as possible, smell the flame turning to gas—and, "if one were Baudelaire/ one could probably hear it turning to marimba music." The dream-house is her separate place, a place for ennui to be nursed, and enjoyed, though she remarks parenthetically: "Many things about this place are dubious." Even what the house looks like is hard to say, or recall. She has seen it but never been inside it. And she will miss it, or avoid it, turning back before she reaches it, again on this day, as she has in the past. "A light to read by—perfect! But—impossible." The wind is too cold, the place is too far away, and the house, as perhaps such a house must be, is boarded up. She has reminded herself of this in time to tell us.

The return walk is the same and yet different: something unexpected is happening, if we can see it.

On the way back our faces froze on the other side.
 The sun came out for just a minute.
 For just a minute, set in their bezels of sand,
 the drab, damp, scattered stones
 were multi-colored,
 and all those high enough threw out long shadows,
 individual shadows, then pulled them in again.
 They could have been teasing the lion sun,
 except that now he was behind them
 —a sun who'd walked the beach the last low tide,
 making those big, majestic paw-prints,
 who perhaps had batted a kite out of the sky to play with.

The poet is dazzled by a slow-gathering illumination in herself: she calls it an illumination of nature. The long "individual shadows" are commanding. They *tempt* whoever observes them—they catch Miss Bishop's gaze, and spirit her from her dream-house. And so the landscape and the weather become for a moment her own. Everything has assumed the giant form of itself. The dog-prints belong to the lion after all, and that lion is the sun. The poem is called "The End of March." It seems to me the greatest poem in English since the death of Stevens. And, if one wants a poem of similar magnitude by a living poet, one must go to Miss Bishop's "At the Fishhouses," to which this is in some ways a companion piece.

By the time "The End of March" draws to a close, an early detail such as the "kite string?—But no kite," has acquired a pathos touched by sublimity. That pathos, with the sublimity excluded or even parodied, is the subject of "Crusoe in England."

A new volcano has erupted,
 the papers say, and last week I was reading
 where some ship saw an island being born:
 at first a breath of steam, ten miles away;
 and then a black fleck—basalt, probably—
 rose in the mate's binoculars
 and caught on the horizon like a fly.
 They named it. But my poor old island's still
 un-rediscovered, un-renamable.
 None of the books has ever got it right.

Well, I had fifty-two
 miserable, small volcanoes I could climb
 with a few slithery strides—
 volcanoes dead as ash heaps.
 I used to sit on the edge of the highest one
 and count the others standing up,
 naked and leaden, with their heads blown off.
 I'd think that if they were the size
 I thought volcanoes should be, then I had
 become a giant;
 and if I had become a giant,
 I couldn't bear to think what size
 the goats and turtles were,
 or the gulls, or the over-lapping rollers
 —a glittering hexagon of rollers
 closing and closing in, but never quite,
 glittering and glittering, though the sky
 was mostly overcast.

As a piece of sheer invention the poem is among the most astonishing Miss Bishop has written. It is, of course, closely related to a number of earlier poems—"The Imaginary Iceberg," "Cape Breton," "Brazil, January 1, 1502," "From Trollope's Journal"—which are about the tug-of-war, so filled with betrayals on both sides, between fancy and habit. Crusoe is trapped in this war without knowing it. On his island, crowded with goats, turtles, gulls, volcanoes, and heaps of clouds, he wonders at the justice of his fate, with the result that he is merely witty. "I told myself/ 'Pity should begin at home.' So the more/ pity I felt, the more I felt at home." He names things, and, to distinguish himself from Adam, he puns. "One billy-goat would stand on the volcano/ I'd christened *Mont d'Espoir* or *Mount Despair*." Before being rescued, Crusoe has become so thorough a citizen—bored until the arrival of Friday, delighted after—that England seems a hopeless anti-climax. "Now I live here, another island,/ that doesn't seem like one, but who decides?" His lone companion since Friday's death of measles, a knife on the shelf, now takes on the final importance of Friday himself: "it reeked of meaning, like a cruci-

fix./ It lived. How many years did I/ beg it, implore it, not to break?/ I knew each nick and scratch by heart,/ the bluish blade, the broken tip,/ the lines of wood-grain on the handle . . . / Now it won't look at me at all." Crusoe says his farewell abruptly, stranded with a memory we are not meant to glimpse all of, and far from comfort or faith.

Miss Bishop's new volume also contains a long poem about a moose. Like "Filling Station" and "Arrival at Santos," it proceeds by simple accumulation of details. It is a narrative which happens to be a poem because a revelation lies at its end. Such a poem is difficult to quote. But it ought to be said that "The Moose" is the most impressive thing Miss Bishop has done so far in a vein that clearly intrigues her more and more. Her villanelle, which carries the refrain "The art of losing isn't hard to master," and rhymes it with *disaster*, is in a class with Empson's "It is the pain, it is the pain, endures": cadences of the poem are going in one's head long after the words are gone. The poet who writes, "Yesterday brought to today so lightly!/ (A yesterday I find almost impossible to lift)," still registers the only pure light we have. Where did she come from? Stances and emotions from Dickinson and Stevens and Moore are in her work. She has drawn from them, as they, were they alive now, would draw from her.

The recipe for a W. S. Merwin—an *objet* by now as readily identified as an A. Calder or an R.C.A. Victor—calls for any twelve of the following: *stone, leaf, door, bone, light, pain, year, dawn, day, death, star, word, blood, frost, sleep, laughter, loneliness, black, pale, torn, broken, wet, dry, ever, never, always, again, forever*. This can lead to things like "Always the dark/ edges of your smile/ paler the bone/ a leaf reminds me the word/ never spoken/ in sleep the messages/ torn in starlight/ years of laughter now/ come again like dawn/ the day of your breath/ broken." In this example the author has gone too far, and used eighteen. Still, the poem is moving in its way, and besides, it was written on the typewriter in just under three minutes. The fact remains that the poem is out of date; it belongs to a phased-out model. For Mr. Merwin's latest pieces make overt gestures in the direction of syntax.² And in a few instances, it should be said, they do something more. The love poems in this book—I am thinking of "Kore," "Spring Equinox Full Moon," and "June Rain" especially—are written out of one man's experience. This means that they resist imitation.

It might be argued that these poems communicate in spite of their pervasive idiom. They are, however, poems that a highly individual poet was meant to write, in this way. And they are a great deal more vivid than anything in Mr. Merwin's last volume, or in the rest of this one. Here are two stanzas, out of order, from "Kore."

I have watched your smile in your sleep
and I know it is the boat
in which my sun rides under the earth

² THE COMPASS FLOWER, by W. S. Merwin. Atheneum. \$4.95 paperback.

all night on the wave of your breath
 no wonder the days grow short
 and waking without you
 is the beginning of winter

We cross the smooth night lake together
 in the waiting boat
 we are welcomed without lights
 again and again we emerge by day
 hand in hand
 from all four corridors at once
 under the echoing dome
 guided by what has not been said

The poem as a whole is touching, and reaches to its proper depth. One feels about it—as one has not always felt about the more personal-seeming of Mr. Merwin's recent poems—that it was meant for some one in particular. Mr. Merwin is among the most gifted poets alive and, with Ashbery, the most influential with younger writers. His progress has been something of an enigma. One cannot point to a given time after which his talent was on the wane, and yet nearly all of his best poems were written between *Green with Beasts* (1956) and *The Lice* (1967). In only one poem of the past decade, "The Judgment of Paris," does he seem to be writing at the top of his powers. It is, to compare small things with great, as if the author of *Hyperion etc.* had striven immensely, in his maturity, to complete twenty-four books of *Endymion*. To the studied mawkishness into which Mr. Merwin has preferred to fall, there will be differing responses even within the same reader. The baffled critic, suspicious of a fashion, may be tempted to hail the master of stones and darknesses with a ripe Bronx cheer; in a better mood, he will want to take the poet to the side, say a few well-chosen words, turn him upside-down, and shake him. Whatever his final direction, Mr. Merwin does at this stage seem wide open to the charge Wyndham Lewis once levelled against another soul vulnerable to parody: *faux naïf*.

Playing at the too little known pastime of *Sortes Creeliana*e, one takes up a volume of poems and lets it fall open at random, to reveal these lines: "The right one./ The wrong one./ The other one./ Heavy time moves/ imponderably present."³ A criticism of life? One is not precisely sure, and turns to another page. "The plan is the body./ The plan is the body./ The plan is the body./ The plan is the body." Slowly the conviction grows on one: this is rather good fun. And we might all sound like this, might we not? And how nice if we could all show a profit like Robert Creeley's. But alas, we lack a school, Mr. Creeley does not. Armed to the teeth with manifestoes, and with a motto, *parvum in parvo*, he springs upon his readers in full battle dress from out of that unique combination of

³ AWAY, by Robert Creeley. Black Sparrow Press. \$3.50 paperback.

heads: Pound and Williams and Olson. A distinct critical vocabulary has been evolved for the sake of showing in what way Mr. Creeley's poems are indeed poems. Here one remains cheerful but unconvinced.

At this most dogged Mr. Creeley has the charm of a minor Williams. Yet Williams himself was, much of the time, a minor Williams. Did we need another?

Staggering, you know
they fall
forward to

their desire. Garbage,
pain, people,

want it all,
their comfort
every time.

One might well admire the enjambment here, and the refusal of stock-in-trade sympathy. But then, the poem is a pretty shocking theft from Williams' "To Elsie," with its dismal "as if"—"as if the earth under our feet/ were/ an excrement of some sky/ and we degraded prisoners/ destined/ to hunger until we eat filth." For Mr. Creeley as for Williams, "It is only in isolate flecks that/ something/ is given off." With mild cunning he meets occasions that other poets would hardly deign to meet at all. He travels light: an earnest of modesty. Yet to one who has nothing to claim, no pretensions to urge, the unassuming tone may come easily enough. This tone is of the essence of Mr. Creeley's charm.

Diane Wakoski shares a publisher with Mr. Creeley: they are both, to judge from the quantity of published work, immensely popular.⁴ It may be that Miss Wakoski is the Creeley of her generation. But if this is so, things are getting rapidly worse. For Miss Wakoski does one thing that Mr. Creeley is too dignified or at least too reserved to do: she wheedles with her audience, and plays cute. She describes herself as a "failed beach girl." For whatever reason, she is without the rudiments of craft. The titles of some of her previous books are *Inside the Blood Factory*, *The Motorcycle Betrayal Poems*, and *Greed*, in eleven parts. Oh, for less greed: one very good thing to be said for Lucien Stryk is that his method of composing poems forbids him to write as copiously as a Creeley or a Wakoski.⁵ Thanks to his stanzas, he has not been the death of so many trees. Mr. Stryk's poems are historical, occasional, or personal: the poet comes off plainly as a decent man who lives a full life. He invents a whole new stanza form: three lines, with a *very* short one in the middle. Unfortunately he uses words like "underarms" which no amount of irony could redeem. And he can write

⁴ WAITING FOR THE KING OF SPAIN, by Diane Wakoski. Black Sparrow Press. \$4.00 paperback.

⁵ SELECTED POEMS, by Lucien Stryk. Swallow Press. \$8.95.

unspeakably bad lines: "Raw hands flinging waste through scuttles gaped behind." Some of Mr. Stryk's work reflects his knowledge of Japanese culture. I was moved by a poem about Weldon Kees: but more, I think, by Weldon Kees than by anything in the poem.

A dust-jacket note calls Edgell Rickword the outstanding English poet between Eliot and Empson.⁶ His own words, however, take one back to the days of Masefield and Rupert Brooke. Mr. Rickword's politics are more sympathetic than theirs, and his satire, "To the Wife of a Non-Interventionist Statesman (March 1938)," is tolerably amusing and commendably angry. But Mr. Rickword cannot quite subdue his hate to the service of his desire to wound: he makes a wide and nasty gash, rather than a cut clean-through. For the rest, *desire* in Mr. Rickword's idiom is "a fragrance of music through the wide air"; *the sea* is "eternal waves that slowly surge"; *absences* make him conceive that "Time's landscape is all bare," and cause him to address his favorite goddess: "Now that you lie in lonely pain,/ O Moon in no flower-clouded bed,/ what shall evoke our joy again?/ Rain Tears, harsh Tears where Fancy fled!" The third line of these four is translationese. And in fact Mr. Rickword has done some translations, which identify themselves on the page first as translations, and somewhat later as Rimbaud. They err in the direction of a prancing sociability: "J'étais insouciant de tous les équipages" comes out "I did not care a rap for any crew." What would Mr. Rickword make of Baudelaire's "Chaque jour vers l'Enfer nous descendons d'un pas"? Perhaps, "Every day we take a nastier pratfall."

Robert Francis is a poet of much energy, some wit, and a worthy minimum of invention.⁷ He has worked steadily and single-mindedly to earn the compliment, "*a good man with words.*" He is an elegant craftsman: the language he is happy to work with is Frost's. His poems succeed in blasting off, and look pretty for awhile, though they never go into orbit. *Valhala* is a long poem with real characters: readers may note passing moves from several of Frost's narrative poems. Mr. Francis works away most passionately at the whimsical-deadpan side of Frost, with some happy results, but without ever creating a fierce or gnomic object on the scale of "All Revelation." His poems nevertheless have a good deal of local interest, in both senses: for the well-chosen detail, and for New England. "Spicebush and Witch-Hazel" may serve as well as anything to illustrate his genuine if limited talent, and the strictness of his descent from a master.

Spicebush almost the first dark twig to flower
In April woods, witch-hazel last of all—
Six months from flower of spring to flower of fall—
The alpha and omega if you please.

⁶ BEHIND THE EYES: COLLECTED POEMS & TRANSLATIONS, by Edgell Rickword. Carcanet Press Dufour Editions. \$8.95.

⁷ COLLECTED POEMS 1936-1976, by Robert Francis. University of Massachusetts Press. \$15.00.

Yet how alike in color, setting, form:
 Both blossoms yellow to confirm the sun,
 Both borne on bushes that are nearly trees,
 Both close to twig though not to keep them warm.
 Only the learned might elucidate
 Why one blooms early and one blooms so late.
 Only the wise could tell the wiser one.

Robert Graves advertises his latest collected volume as his last.⁸ It is a pity to have it yoked to an introduction by a friend of the poet's, James McKinley, who talks rubbish in an odd mingling of the gossipy-familiar and the ceremonial, and talks it for ten pages, in the course of which he announces: "If art is alchemical mutation, compression, sanitizing of experience, it can't but be better understood if we know something of the primal pulp out of which the writer refines the smooth surface of his pages." Primal pulp forsooth. "What sort of man," he then makes bold to ask, "is Robert Graves?" By at least one of the elegant turns that follow I confess myself utterly baffled: "Traumatized," Mr. McKinley writes, "although safely sheltered by friends in Essex, [Graves] watched Hitler overwhelm Poland in September 1939. It seemed analogous to his condition." The curious may be left to inquire whether the "it" is to be assigned to Hitler, Poland, a fear of being invaded, or the wretchedness of the human condition in general, while the rest of us ask: what provoked Graves to ally himself with this sort of thing, and subject his readers to it? The old introduction, by the author himself, ought to be preserved.

In it Graves left a record of his allegiance. He insisted that he could feel no pride in his largest triumphs, since they were not made by him but given to him: "Who can regard himself as the originator of lines which move readers no less than he was himself moved to write them? Granted, numerous poems of simple male parentage (the Apollonian sort) are widely honored; but they do not concern me." Graves's manner even when alluding, in poetry or prose, to the White Goddess, is of a piece with his public self: severe, downright, flaring, and athletic. The White Goddess poems are at the center of his achievement for critics who take him at his word. "To Juan at the Winter Solstice" is certainly his greatest poem. But he is in fact a comic poet, if one allows the word its broadest sense: a poet who writes of the joined rather than the broken. A list of his really memorable poems would have to count items in several categories: war poems, satire, myth (lower-case, small-scale), epigram, psychological study, and, closely related to this last, memories of childhood. There has been a certain thinning out in recent years, with love poems that can feel formulaic, and a certain amount of self-conscious pottering amid the foliage of reputation. But one still turns without hesitation to "In the Wilderness," "The White Goddess," "Leaving the Rest Unsaid," "The Portrait," "Vanity," "Counting the Beats," "Pure Death," "Surgical

⁸ NEW COLLECTED POEMS, by *Robert Graves*. Doubleday. \$10.00.

Ward: Men," "Beauty in Trouble," "The Sweet-Shop Round the Corner," "Apples and Water," "Warning to Children," "Leda," "The Thieves," "The Halls of Bedlam," "A Jealous Man," "Dawn Bombardment," and three or four dozen more. "Recalling War"—which began, "Entrance and exit wounds are silvered clean,/ The track aches only when the rain reminds"—has been banished: one cannot be sure why. The distinct echo of Wilfred Owen may have been troubling. But much has stayed, for us to return to, and we do. Is Graves a minor poet? A major minor poet? A minor major poet? There are those who will enjoy deciding. At all events, he has the most perfect ear of any poet in our century, with perhaps two exceptions: Hart Crane and Edward Thomas.

Graves has been as thoroughly original as a poet who knows his tradition can be. But the voices in the background of his work sound like a stable group: Hardy, Dickinson, and Keats. And it comes as a mild shock to find Graves among the Irish poets in John Montague's handsome anthology.⁹ Placed in this company, however, a few of his pieces sound mad in a sufficiently Irish way. There are too many poets here, and not enough poems by the big ones: Swift, Goldsmith, Darley, Yeats, Joyce. This is an anthology that prefers wide representation to sure emphasis. But even within these limits, there is too much of Austin Clarke and Denis Devlin and John Montague, and not enough of Patrick Kavanagh and James Stephens: notably Irish poets who manage not to be in the least provincial. A high point in the anthology is Stephens' version of "Inis Fál," by Egan O'Rahilly (1670-1726), where phrases from "Adam's Curse" and "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop" and "Meditations in Time of Civil War" are more than hinted at, and exquisitely turned a second time.

If one has some Latin, but too little to read the poetry with an attentive ease, one must take on faith the persistent rumors about Lucretius: that his poem has a special flavor which English can get nowhere near; that there is something peculiarly reviving about his temperament; that he is a *mind*, as well as a poet, worth knowing. Certainly, none of the available versions gives me the impression that I am hearing not only the doctrine but also the sound of Lucretius, the way a few lines from Frost's "West-Running Brook" do. Existence, Frost says, is like two dancers, Pirouot and Pirouette, who stand still and yet dance, and "run away."

It seriously, sadly, runs away
 To fill the abyss's void with emptiness.
 It flows beside us in this water brook,
 But it flows over us. It flows between us
 To separate us for a panic moment.
 It flows between us, over us, and *with* us.
 And it is time, strength, tone, light, life, and love—
 And even substance lapsing unsubstantial;

⁹ THE BOOK OF IRISH VERSE, edited by John Montague. Macmillan. \$12.95.

The universal cataract of death
 That spends to nothingness—and unresisted,
 Save by some strange resistance in itself,
 Not just a swerving, but a throwing back,
 As if regret were in it and were sacred.

The new *De Rerum Natura* by C. H. Sisson is probably the best of the newer verse translations.¹⁰ Mr. Sisson writes verse that would satisfy as prose: his Lucretius is marked by sobriety. Compared with Rolfe Humphries, this translator is slow to the point of being hardly fluent, and all the better for that. Mr. Sisson is recognizably poetic, without poetic diction, and colloquial, without spangles. He is quietly epigrammatic where he has to be: "Nothing indeed is lost of perceptible things./ One thing is made of another, and nature allows/ No new creation except at the price of a death." It is still a good translation, with both words stressed. But it ought to do what it promises, which is to put readers onto the scent of the original, making them less satisfied to know it from a distance.

A poet's strengths may be unevenly distributed: one crowds another out, or pulls extra weight in another's absence. Robert Penn Warren never got into the habit of striking from his poems any phrase of a wince-making badness.¹¹ "In the least drop spilled between nipple and the ferocious/ Little lip-suction"—the gentle reader is less gentle after this, and may feel discouraged from going on. Elsewhere, having settled on a four-beat accentual meter, Mr. Warren permits himself two scarcely credible lines: "And bright hair, wind-strung, to tease the sun's pride" and "How the sand, compressed, burst to silver light." How much does this matter? Less than we imagine when reading it. Mr. Warren's poetry has made itself felt, for some five decades, as a moral presence and a moral *pressure* of an unusual kind, and he is read by people who are genuinely interested in poetry. Since *Promises* (1956) the poems have grown steadily more impressive. He is not among the great originals of American poetry, yet, in their power to astonish, his poems resemble Melville's: there is the same tested and life-weary appeal to experience, with the sense of a fierce self-command maintained against all odds.

The modernism in Mr. Warren's poetry always seemed a displaced moralism. He refused to borrow, from Eliot or anyone else, new ways of organizing a poem: in this he was at several removes from the Tate of "Ode to the Confederate Dead." What gave his early pieces the modern look was their use of such honorific abstractions as Time, and Hope, and Responsibility. Mr. Warren has become a better poet, to my mind, in proportion as he has learned to do without these. He is by temperament an observer of nature, a scholar of its morals, and an ironist when he is compelled to put nature side by side with morality. He can therefore be, like Hardy, a little hard to take. But his vocabulary is more limited than

¹⁰ LUCRETIUS: THE POEM ON NATURE, translated by C. H. Sisson. Carcanet Press Dufour Editions. \$8.95.

¹¹ SELECTED POEMS 1923-1975, by Robert Penn Warren. Random House. \$15.00.

Hardy's, and coaxes even more patiently, where decorum would lie in not coaxing at all. Mr. Warren sees, however, what few of us have seen. His poems draw their sustenance from a world of buzzards and swamps and forests almost unscarred; of iron loyalties and sudden betrayals; of the aimless talk of old men, interrupted by a rifle shot, and followed by silence. It is a world in which everything may depend on a rattlesnake heard scuttling for its hole, or a hawk seen obliquely among the shadows. The part of Mr. Warren that lives at ease in New England does not write his poetry.

The single lasting reservation one feels about this poet is that he cannot resist the big effect. There are times when it needs to be resisted, and a good poet ought to know those times: a phrase like "the delirious illusion of language" does not belong at the end of a genuine poem. Nevertheless, Mr. Warren has earned the name of poet several times over: a poet, after all, is a man who does what no one else, no other poet even, could do. Mr. Warren alone could have written the description, more a prayer than a description, of a condemned man dying in a southern penitentiary, who vows to last as long as the morphine will last. The poem is called "Keep that Morphine Moving, Cap," it begins "Oh, in the pen, oh, in the pen,/ The cans, they have no doors," and it ends with these stanzas.

"Jest keep that morphine moving, Cap,
And me, I'll tough it through,"
Who had toughed it through nigh forty years
And couldn't remember why
He had cut her throat that night, and so
Come to the pen, here to the pen,
Where cans, they have no doors,

And where he sits, while deep inside,
Inside his gut, inside his gut,
The pumpkin grows and grows, and only
In such a posture humped, can he
Hold tight his gut, and half believe,
Like you or me, like you or me,
That the truth will not be true.—Oh, Warden,

Keep that morphine moving, for
All night beneath that blazing bulb,
Bright drop by drop, from the soaked hair, sweat
Drips, and each drop, on the gray cement
Explodes like a star. Listen to that
Small sound, and let us, too, keep pulling
For him, like we all ought to, who,
When truth at last is true, must try,
Like him, to tough it through—but no!—
Not in the pen, not in the pen,
Where cans, they have no doors.

Lucretius has repose of mind; so, to a degree, does Robert Penn Warren: it is a consolation great poetry has sometimes been thought to impart. And it is surely one thing Ted Hughes does without. In the years since *Lupercal* and *Wodwo*, the volumes that led his admirers to hope for much, Mr. Hughes has become a disagreeable poet, though not in a new way. *Crow* owed a measure of its success to the short memory of criticism: this song was sung by Sweeney. But Mr. Hughes has made of his un repose, of what Keats would have called his irritability, a secure and profitable industry. Could anyone have predicted that he would find a new outlet in children's literature? The dourness of his gift would seem to disqualify him. Yet Mr. Hughes's last two books—sent to adults for review—have been children's books. His new volume is about moon-creatures.¹² The moon motif, however, is not insisted on, except as a pretext for nasty goings-on. Disembodied heads "gnash their fangs and shriek in the face of the lonely wayfarer at dead of night." The victim of a man-hunt is described in this way: "His bowels twist like a strong snake, and for some seconds he sways there useless with terrified surprise." The same poem ends with the victim being devoured; the poet comments: "It is terrible, it is terrible, O it is terrible!" These doggerel poems are rather disagreeable and rather scary. It is not impossible that children exist who will like them.

Judith Moffett's first volume evokes a good many feelings of surprise and delight.¹³ She has something of the good-natured high humor, the willful high spirits, of the author of "Living in Sin": the pre-sorority, pre-either-or, Adrienne Rich. She lacks Adrienne Rich's facility—a handicap that brings in unexpected rewards. Miss Moffett cannot always find it in herself to satisfy a given occasion with small displays of verbal dexterity, and this forces her to pick the occasions carefully. Difficult, as yet, in a few arbitrary ways, she is thoroughly in control in the Hopkins-mannered dedicatory stanzas, in a long birthday poem, about vision and vocation, called "Glossolalia," in some well-observed and remarkably personal nature poems—"Cecropia Terzine," "Comeupance," "Advice to a Rookie Climber"—and in three autobiographical pieces, "Requiem for Any Possible Thing," "Other Woman," and "Bending the Twig." With her own condition as a woman she keeps up the sort of dialogue—partly ironic, even weighed down, but also gracious and bold—that one feels must be what an alert sanity affords. The let-down comes only when journalism intrudes, as in her scattered protests against air- and water-pollution, where the finest ecological sentiments fail to produce the finest poetry. She writes bad lines that no good poet would be embarrassed at having written, though some might have leaped to their feet in agony, sat down at once to eliminate them, and sighed with relief as after a narrow escape. Yet the whole of Miss Moffett's book makes an impression deeper than the parts, and the moments of exhilaration are her own.

¹² MOON-WHALES AND OTHER MOON POEMS, by *Ted Hughes*. Viking. \$7.95.

¹³ KEEPING TIME, by *Judith Moffett*. Louisiana State University Press. \$3.95 paperback.

Miss Moffett is unusually big-hearted—for a poet, I almost said. But it is true that many of her contemporaries take cool to be the preeminently poetic temperature. And Miss Moffett makes their restraint seem what it is: an affectation.

What joy, what comfort! In the grate
Soft bickerings and forking light;
Fierce heat throbs from the fireplace-stone;
For joy the kettle clears its throat
And flips its lid! These moments when
Life seems so rich and splendid on
Quite mortal terms, how odious
To draw divine comparison!

True. Yet it draws itself; alas
Lord Christ that thou art merciless!
The spattering sparks shoot up and die,
The voice cries in the wilderness
No more, not ever. Should it cry
The whole wrenched cosmos, violently
Charged meaningful, would thrum with joy
And so would I, and so would I.

“Wrenched cosmos” and “meaningful” dissipate some of the force of this: they are more ordinary than the rest, more to be expected in this kind of poem. But no reader would doubt that the cry is long and loud and true, and the voice authentic. A physiognomist would likely discern in Miss Moffett a large organ of veneration: this is no bad thing in a poet. It doubles as a spiritual keenness to which one is not quite tempted to give the name of religion. Miss Moffett, who is an American, sees and feels most when she is in nature, and thinking of the far from human company she has, which is beyond her and does not love her and yet keeps her going. Her instructions for kindling a fire are instructions for growing more strong in solitude.

Now abruptly, between one breath and the next,
feel your ring of bared earth become
the hub of the wilderness.
All round above you mountains, massive, cloven,
furred densely with green—blue-green
spikes of juniper, yellow-green sheen of maple—
will lean nearer and intense in their awareness of you
await the kindling of the fire;
expect this.

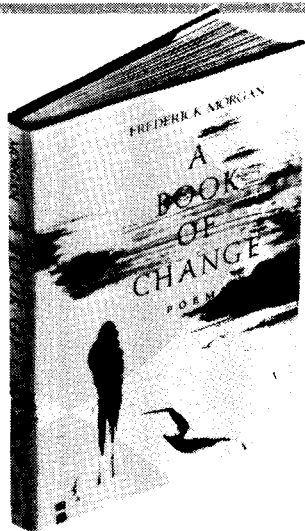
The distance between Miss Moffett’s best poems and her worst is very great. The best, however, are so powerfully themselves, and the worst

carry so clearly the stamp of the same personality, that one is inclined to predict for her a future of less and less imperfect exhilarations. The drab or easy or merely notes-and-comment-ish asides in her work ought to pass from view; and she will go her way without a push, as one who is at all times vividly self-possessed. This is a poet whose slightest tremor can register: who can make a joke of herself, when she pleases, without breaking stride—"Ladies/ and gentlemen: the human form bovine"; can chide a secret, "Out of that bag,/ cat!"; can hear the "soft bickerings" of a fire's chat, or reflect "atwilt with wryness" at herself, on the mistake of visiting an old lover; can imagine herself protecting friends, signalling to them, advising them of shelter, like a weathervane "Whose trust is telling how the winds blow truly/ Not what it wishes: take these words for what/ They're worth. If love's a sign of holy writ/ The windiest words I wrote of you were holy." If one comes to like Miss Moffett's poems very much, it is in some part by growing fond of their author in a personal way; and this makes it hard to resist the impulse to wish her well, though she seems in all truth settled and unshakeable in her vigor. A good poet, on her way to being a fine poet, she strikes one as something more unusual still: a good spirit. May she thrive.

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ROBERT MARTIN ADAMS

A Collective Creation¹

RUDIMENTARY STATISTICS ARE IMPRESSIVE. The three volumes and 1,553 pages of *Mimekor Yisrael: Classical Jewish Folktales* contain a thousand and eighty narratives. Their author was the Jewish people; the collector, arranger and adapter was Micha Joseph Bin Gorion (Berdyczewski), who was born in the Ukraine and lived most of his later years in Germany; his dates are 1865–1921. Though some parts of his collection appeared in print during his lifetime, the entire corpus of stories was first published, posthumously, in Hebrew, at Tel Aviv (1939–1945) under the editorship of the collector's son, Emmanuel Bin Gorion. It has now been translated into English by I. M. Lask, and is published more than half a century after the collector's death, with an introduction by Dan Ben-Amos.

The three volumes of *Classical Folktales* are loosely divided into National Tales, Religious Tales, and (!) Folk Tales; but the distinctions evidently do not count for very much, and the stories themselves could be categorized in so many different ways—by theme, by form, by provenance, and so forth and so on—that any grouping is bound to appear provisional and arbitrary. The three volumes are furnished with a full panoply of apparatus, tables of contents, indexes, source-indications in depth, introductions, explanations, annotations; but the terrain is so vast that even an informed reader, practiced in the ways of folktale and Jewish lore, will probably have trouble navigating within it by any procedure more elaborate than dead reckoning. The books are a wilderness of narrative, designed as it seems to me for wandering and wondering readers—a tropical rain forest of thickly-interwoven invention. There are legends of immemorial antiquity and incredible diversity: bits and pieces of Biblical commentary; analogues, abridgements, and amplifications of Biblical stories; retellings of classic myths, fantasies about Alexander and Solomon, semi-hagiographies of the great Rabbis—Meir, Akiba, ibn Ezra—, witch-and-devil narratives, riddles, puzzles, moralities, palindromes, cautionary tales, old-wives' stories, parables, fragments of popular history, beast-fables, miracles, jokes, prophecies, martyrologies, snappy answers to foolish questions, oriental romances, poems, *fabliaux*, genealogies, charms, episodes in rhymed prose, homilies, cryptograms, apologues, caveats, exhortations, words to the wise, protests, expostulations, biographies and biographical anecdotes, deeds of revenge, dreams of glory, tests of virtue, emblems of spiritual grace, justifications of divine wisdom, magical tricks, temptations, colloquies with Elijah, wicked-stepmother relations, spook-and-haunt discoveries, conjurings,

¹ MIMEKOR YISRAEL: *Classical Jewish Folktales*, collected by Micha Joseph Bin Gorion, edited by Emanuel Bin Gorion, translated by I. M. Lask, with an introduction by Dan Ben-Amos. Indiana University Press, \$50.

spells, exorcisms, shaggy dogs, ballads, disguisings, dream-interpretations, horoscopes, textual explications, enigmas, transformations, and more, much, much more.

Mimekor Yisrael is, in essence, a super-collection, based in good part on previous collections and encompassing them. Some of the stories are familiar, others unfamiliar; some should be better known, others could never conceivably amount to a hill of beans. Amid a lot of sand and gravel there are frequent grains and lumps of heavy yellow stuff to excite and delight the adventurous panhandler. We are given to understand that the collector not only selected from an even larger field of stories available for inclusion in his volume, but that he exercised a variety of literary controls over the telling of those he selected. In a few instances, he gives multiple versions of a story: mostly he doesn't. We aren't told what was the basis for the decision, what limits he placed on replication. To an extent that can't readily be measured, he cut, modified, and recast for literary effect many, perhaps most, of the stories selected. This is natural enough when dealing with materials like folktales which are naturally fluid of outline and often artless: at most, Bin Gorion did no more than the brothers Grimm did before him with one set of popular stories, or Standish O'Grady with another.

He was also motivated by a conscious desire to represent as many as possible of the diverse strains of Jewish thought and feeling, to include heretics and sectarians, vagrants and eccentrics, as well as representatives of an orthodox tradition. All these procedural pressures and strains of interest surround the stories, but without giving one reason to mistrust their presentation: quite the contrary. Inclusivity is the best of all *parti pris* for a collector; making a good story a little better is the most venial of faults in a man obsessed with narration. As it is, the stories of *Mimekor Yisrael* run every conceivable gamut, including that of artistic merit; some are of great complexity, compression, wit, and beauty, others extraordinarily naïve and pointless. I don't find anything that specifically dates itself after the seventeenth century; though they all have sources, and some of these sources may well be "original," I don't find any stories to which one could assign a specific and distinctive author. They are a collective creation, of a nation, of a religious group, but most particularly of an ethos and a loosely defined one—an ethos, almost, in the making.

Except, conceivably, for some particularly unfortunate graduate student, I can't imagine that anyone is going to sit down and read through the full three volumes from beginning to end. Indeed, though I'm not qualified even to attempt using the volumes this way, I don't think they lend themselves to finding a particular story for which one might be searching; the titles assigned in text and index seem to have rather the function of titillating one's curiosity than of identifying the story's particular theme and actors. What is certain is that for most unprofessional readers the three volumes will be an adventure in browsing and sampling, a succession of various surprises that will only gradually sort themselves out into a set of emergent patterns, a kind of communal psychogeography.

A major and striking theme that recurs again and again in the stories is that of learning, expounding, or what is called "engaging in" Torah. The overwhelming heroes of the culture are its scholars, and many are the tales told of hardships undergone by scholars (not to mention their wives and children) in the process of learning Torah, or fulfilling its commandments. Tenacity, ingenuity, and self-denial are constantly being called upon to keep men from violating the creed; and the doctors of the people are their protagonists in these struggles. Even if one has learned only a tiny bit of Torah, that bit if treasured in a devout and repentant heart will ensure one a place in the Life to Come and very likely help one toward prosperity of a highly material order in the here and now.

Remarkable is the tale (II,93) of a young man who, as he entered the house of a prostitute, laid down his prayer shawl, but was reminded by the way the four fringes at each corner bunched together of the commandment about the wearing of the *tzitzit* (Numbers 15, 37-41). Struck with remorse, he fell to the floor and beat his head on the ground. The girl approached him, thinking he had noted some blemish or defect on her body, but he explained all: it was his religious conscience. She was so impressed that she divided all her belongings, giving a third to the king, a third to the poor, and taking the last third with her to the young man's school. After suitable interrogations, Rabbi Hiyya admitted her to the Jewish faith, the young man promptly married her, "and disciples of the sages were born of her." Rabbi Simon Ben Lakish, with two friends, used to rob and pillage all who passed them on the way (II,55); but he repented and engaged in Torah, while they did not. When they all died, he was saved and they were not; and they protested, outspokenly enough, against the unfairness of the sentence. But the Holy and Blessed One made the difference perfectly clear to them, and when they wanted a second chance, told them straight that by the terms of the covenant they got only one. (Interesting and characteristic that they did not submit to damnation without an answer to their legal questions; but an answer they got, and a legal one.)

A young man wins great rewards from the king because he is able to read and interpret the Book of Genesis, though of the rest of the Torah he is utterly ignorant (II,62); the moral is, "Consider. This child learned nothing but the Book of Genesis, yet the Holy and Blessed One gave him so much. Then how much more will be received by the one who studies Torah and Mishnah!" Another young man is denied a wealthy and beautiful bride because he cannot pass an impromptu oral examination in advanced hermeneutics (II,221); the bride is instantly assigned to a better scholar, who can recite his lessons right. Hideously appropriate misfortune overtakes the villain who alters a scroll of the Torah (II,191); because he erased the letter *ayin* in a single word, his own eye fell out, and remained behind under the table of the synagogue. Serving the Torah is unqualifiedly good; subordinating the Torah to an earthly end is unqualifiedly bad. Thus even Rabbi Tarfon must suffer because when he was being dragged off by murderers, he escaped from them by calling aloud

that he was Rabbi Tarfon (famous for his skill in Torah); he should have paid ransom, for he was rich, but having "used" for a low, practical end the Torah and his skill in it, he was forever disgraced (II,23).

The morality of these stories contains a great deal of calculation—not in the sense of ulterior motives, but as a striving for equivalency, a balancing of accounts. Elijah the prophet, in the course of a journey with Rabbi Joshua ben Levi (II,112), commits a series of apparently unjust acts—killing the kind man's cow, raising the rude man's fallen wall, blessing the selfish crowd with the beneficent phrase, "May God make you all leaders." But balance is preserved, after all, as the indignant rabbi finds out. The death of his cow averts the death of the good man's wife, the miraculous rebuilding of the wall keeps the rude man from discovering that there's a treasure hidden under it, the presence of many leaders will prove a curse to the selfish crowd. Even precedence and social rank in the World to Come are debated and finally arranged on the basis of so much precedence for so much merit; the rabbi who was dismayed that he would have to associate with a butcher is reconciled to this fate when he learns that it is a particularly meritorious butcher. The working out of this justice is not without its harsh side: not only is the godfearing man duly rewarded after his misfortunes and comforted with good hopes for the beyond, but he has the pleasure of seeing his brother and his brother's children (who all failed to appreciate him) drowned before his eyes in a ferryboat accident (II,122).

Yet there is much in these stories that transcends harsh legalism and rabbinical points of privilege. The disciples of Rabbi Simon ben Shetah bought for him an ass, from a certain Arab (II,40), and on it they found a precious stone. But the rabbi told them to return it to the Arab, and when they protested that there was a clear tradition for keeping it, he challenged them in ringing words: "Do you suppose that Simon ben Shetah sought to be wealthy? He would far sooner prefer to hear that the Arab said, 'Blessed be the God of Israel.' That would make him happier than all the money in the world."

Even more pointed is the lovely story of the rabbi and the tailor (II,270). Because the rabbi found himself overwhelmed by law business in the city, he decided to become a hermit and devote himself wholly to the Torah. His servant the tailor offered to accompany him as his servant, if the rabbi would teach him every day a verse of the Pentateuch. With some misgivings (because he was a scholar, and did not like being distracted from his studies), the rabbi agreed; and the arrangement worked well till the verse (Genesis 35,22), reading "Reuben went and lay with Bilhah, his father's concubine." This the tailor could not understand, for Reuben was supposed to be a good man, and the deed was evil. So he asked the rabbi, and got a good academic answer: "Ignoramus! Look up Rashi's explanations about this." But the tailor could not read Rashi, so he pined in discontent, and gave up his lessons in Torah altogether, till from sheer intellectual frustration, he lay at death's door. But there was uproar in heaven over this injustice, and after some preliminary diplomatic maneuvers, Reuben himself, son of Jacob, was dispatched with his company of

disciples to impart Torah nightly to the tailor. After a while, the rabbi learned what was going on, and asked to sit in on the class. But despite the tailor's pleas, all that could be granted was that the rabbi might sit on a nearby stone, and pick up what he could of the instruction: what his soul was capable of hearing, that he heard. As for the rest, he could hear only voices, but no clear speech.

Learning is a supreme value; understanding Torah is so important that if a man cannot hope to achieve it, he might as well be dead. Yet even to know it as the rabbi knew it may be to fail before the law. Not only the text but the world itself with which the text deals is a tissue of impossible dilemmas and insoluble enigmas. Nature poses nothing but insidious questions, to which the correct answers are sometimes inconceivably devious, sometimes utterly simple. The casual stranger whom one encounters on a country road may be the ghost of a murdered traveller, the king of demons, one of the 36 secret saints on whom the existence of the world depends, a golem, or the prophet Elijah, whom it is well to mention; depending on who he happens to be, he will pose to you one complex moral problem or another. However anxiously one studies Torah, one can never be sure one has understood the question rightly, let alone given the correct answer. Any form of life can convert itself into a Talmudic riddle. An old man and a scholastically-minded snake match Biblical texts and interpretations before King Solomon (I,117); when the old man crushes the beast's head, it's not from hate or malice, but a simple consequence of the fact that he's won the argument. A bird with a highly developed talent for casuistry and a dry sense of humor makes an abject fool of a huntsman (IV,10). A lame Jew consults a healer, who turns out to be a demon (IV,48): "If you are a Jew," says this articulate fiend, "why have you come here? Does a Jew go to a place of idolatry? . . . And now know that it was your time to have been healed tomorrow, but because you have done this you will never find any cure at all."

These malignant but often quite attractive demons penetrate the structure of a world which, even without them, seems artfully devised to test the exegetical powers of the rabbinical heroes. What the latter win by prodigies of subtlety they are likely to lose by lack of simplicity: it is a bind which reminds a literary reader again and again of those confronted by the heroes of Kafka and Borges. And like Kafka and Borges too, these anonymous storytellers move us with deft, unobtrusive skill into and out of fantasy, away from and back to "reality." A king who has passed a cruel law against poor Jews (I,256) is abducted through the air and dropped in a graveyard where each day for a week a different poor man brings him a loaf of bread. As a special favor his captors finally allow him to work as a laborer, and the work stretches out into years of menial toil, until by chance he is selected as king of a foreign nation, and finds himself on the battlefield, besieging the very city over which he used to rule. He makes his way into the palace, returns to the original room from which he was abducted, and as he revokes the cruel law against the Jews, finds that only fifteen minutes have elapsed since his original abduction.

Eerie and weird overtones are everywhere. Reb Binum the gravedigger

met in the synagogue a dead man whom he had himself buried (II,217); the specter was wearing a wreath of grass, and explained that it was grass from the garden of Eden, which he had placed on his head so that he should not have to endure the bad smell of this world. The same shiver of mystery, the same intimation of a remote perspective, is conveyed in a few words by the most elegant and polished of the narratives. Nahman Ketufa was strangely conceived and as strangely silenced on the very day of his birth (II,188); only after twelve years did he utter another word, and then, in response to a request, he uttered five prophecies in alphabetic order, capped with a prophecy of his own death, which followed shortly. "That is the story of Nahman Ketufa of Kfar Biram. And there are forty saints with him in a cave."

" 'Fetch me my own statue and image,' said Alexander (I,118); and the king swore by it that he would not return until he reached a place where it is impossible to pass either to the right or to the left and where he would not find any way of continuing." What he found written over the doorway to the Garden of Eden, and what tribute he demanded and received as a price of not adventuring further, the reader may learn for himself—along with a thousand other curious matters. King Solomon contrived a way to rebuke his chief counsellor Benaiah for cheating at chess (unthinkable that the King should lose a match in fair competition!) without directly humiliating the man or hurting his feelings: Simon ben Shetah accomplished with equal skill and a good deal less delicacy the burning of eighty witches at Askelon. What the wayfarer learned from two ravens he was able to apply to a lion, but with unexpected results; and certain important negotiations took place between a He-mouse and a She-mouse which the reader who has learned about them will not easily forget.

One could fuss over this detail or that. Mr. Lask's translations aren't invariably smooth or graceful (but of their accuracy I'm simply not qualified to judge); and one could jib here and there at the grouping of the stories, or nitpick at the preliminary apparatus, which doesn't lay out its materials as perspicuously as might be. But the three volumes are a pure fountain of joy and uncontrived narrative, a garden of delights. By contrast, one can hardly help noting the sad poverty of modern narration. Blake protested to the Muses their growing coldness:

How have you left the ancient love
The bards of old enjoyed in you!
The languid strings do scarcely move,
The sound is forced, the notes are few!

But Blake didn't know the half of it.

DEAN FLOWER

Fiction Chronicle

FOR SOME REASON YOU CAN ALWAYS GET ATTENTION by declaring that the novel is dead. Joyce was supposed to have killed it. Now Pynchon, Gaddis and Barthelme are said to be dismantling it for good—just as Cervantes and Sterne and Flaubert did, no doubt. Frequently novelists themselves—one thinks of Henry Miller, John Barth, Leslie Fiedler—bemoan its obsolescence while their typewriters clack away. Still, it can be depressing. New fiction crowds the bookstore shelves month after month, and there is nothing new under the sun. In these pages a few months ago Joseph Epstein asked, disheartened, is fiction necessary? The cure for these blues, oddly enough, seems not to be more radical experiment or substitute entertainment but simply good novels. And during this past season an astonishingly large number of them have appeared. It is instructive to note that most of them are by experienced, well-established writers. Perhaps this marks a conservative trend. For now we might simply celebrate the fact that there are so many distinguished writers of fiction around, producing works as resonant and valuable as any we have seen in the last decade. I look first at a group of translated novels, then at short story collections, and finally at a series of British and American novels.

Carlos Fuentes believes as strongly as anyone that contemporary Latin American writers are unacknowledged legislators of their worlds. He once summed up what they might do: “Re-invent history, tear it from the epic and transform it into personality, humor, language, myth: save the Latin Americans from abstraction and place them in the human kingdom of the accidental . . . only the writer, in Latin America, can do this.” (*Tri-Quarterly*, Winter, 1972.) Fuentes’ seventh novel¹ and longest (more than 420,000 words) attempts to follow this program on the most ambitious scale, but it fails to achieve anything like his vision. He doesn’t re-invent history, he paraphrases it. The novel’s center is occupied by El Señor, Don Felipe II (1527–1598) and his famous Escorial, mausoleum and palace, symbolic for Fuentes of all that is feudal, Catholic, and death-embracing in Spanish civilization.

El Señor marries Elizabeth Tudor, not Mary, in this version, and his grandparents become his parents, but this hardly constitutes major transformation. Despite innumerable walk-ons by such figures as Don Juan, Cervantes and Ionesco, despite forays into The New World and The Next World, *Terra Nostra* remains mired in the past. That, of course, is by Fuentes’ design: “our world,” he explains at the end, is invaded by “heretics and monks from the fifteenth century, conquistadores and painters from the seventeenth century, philosophers and revolutionaries from

¹ TERRA NOSTRA, by *Carlos Fuentes*. Trans. from the Spanish by Margaret Sayers Peden. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$15.

the eighteenth century, courtesans and social climbers from the nineteenth . . ." Sound interesting? Unfortunately it comes out slow-paced, cluttered with all the predictable plots and characters of a bad opera: halberdiers, muleteers, alguacils, duennas, heresiarchs, and all the rest, in full unconvincing costume. There can be no re-invention of history when the past is so solemnly and uncritically draped in these threadbare garments. One character exclaims, "We've spent our lives constructing a house for the dead," and that's what Fuentes' novel does too. In Spanish *escorial* means "heap of rubbish." Like *El Señor*, the author doubts he can transform it.

If Fuentes wished to "save the Latin Americans from abstraction," he surely meant the abstractions of politicians and bureaucrats. But his novel substitutes so much abstraction of its own as to squelch the very things he values—humor, personality, the "human kingdom." Heretic debates believer, youth debates age, romantic debates skeptic, and so on through the cast of more than eighty. Considering the possible permutations, this could make for a vast ideological drama, but in fact Fuentes has far fewer ideas than he pretends. His essential dialectic poses a medieval Christian mentality (masculine, punitive, ascetic, manipulative) against a nature-loving ideal (androgynous, diverse, earthy, tolerant). These oppositions surface early in the novel, readily recognizable, but are only confessed at the end where Fuentes—the Stuart Gilbert of his own epic—puts it all into a chart of thirty-two dichotomies. Out of this dialectic, however, comes no new synthesis, and that is what makes this novel so long. Fuentes admits the problem in the early pages, describing himself in a character "who detested equally mimicry of the archaic and avant-garde ingeniousness, who would not accept a past that had not been nourished in the present or a present that did not comprehend the past, who confused all symptoms with all causes: 'Bah! I have sung women in three cities./But it is all one./ . . . they mostly had gray eyes./But it is all one . . .'" Beware of the novelist who launches an enormous epic with the gloomy prediction, "It is all one." Better read Borges instead.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez shares with Fuentes the view of history's hopeless repetitions, the fascination of tyrants, the relish for skulls and rot, the experience of life as surreal. But *The Autumn of the Patriarch* succeeds in every way that *Terra Nostra* fails:² it is perfectly unified and concentrated, proceeds from particularized places and believable voices, and is resolved by devastating ironies and a myth that transcends history. Part of the difference can be explained by Gregory Rabassa's brilliant translation, which gives the narrative a verbal texture so supple and rich as to make us forget it had a Spanish original. Here is the opening:

Over the weekend the vultures got into the presidential palace by pecking through the screens on the balcony windows and the flapping of their wings stirred up the stagnant time inside, and at dawn on Monday

² THE AUTUMN OF THE PATRIARCH, by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Trans. from the Spanish by Gregory Rabassa. Harper and Row. \$10.

the city awoke out of its lethargy of centuries with the warm, soft breeze of a great man dead and rotting grandeur.

Under such conditions one doesn't worry that the Spanish might be clearer or more eloquent. But the real reasons for García Márquez' success lie in its form. The novel is shaped by a series of bold conceptions: the idea of a centuries-old tyrant so legendary as to be almost immortal; the idea of a non-chronological dream-monologue to unfold this legend, echoing with voices; and the idea of a patriarch given identity *only* by these voices.

The beauty of these conceptions is that each articulates idea through form; there are no essays, no debates. Line by line we struggle to rationalize the hyperbole, straighten out the syntax, distinguish this voice from that one (they can switch even in mid-phrase), order the events chronologically. If we must often fail in this, what we learn compensates: the mind of the patriarch cannot be known, only hypothesized. We know of his fear, paranoia, pride, frustration, insomnia, but cannot be sure in whose mind they really exist. García Márquez has learned something from Faulkner much more important than the groping, run-on sentence: it might be called "narration by ignorant conjecture." That was how we knew Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom*. García Márquez carries the method a step further. Within each sentence any number of voices might tell the story, including the patriarch's own. The effect is to define the legendary figure by negations: larger than life, ruthless beyond belief, he becomes at last "a comic tyrant" on a throne of illusions. The moral of his life is not, as some critics have suggested, his discovery that "a lie is more comfortable than doubt," because García Márquez' purpose is not, as I take it, psychoanalysis of the despot. The moral is that his life is an "ignominious fiction":

he was condemned not to know life except in reverse, condemned to decipher the seams and straighten the threads of the woof and the warp of the tapestry of illusions of reality without suspecting even too late that the only livable life was one of show, the one we saw from this side which wasn't his general sir, this poor people's side . . . where love was contaminated by the seeds of death but was all love general sir, where you yourself were only an uncertain vision of pitiful eyes through the dusty peepholes of the window of a train . . .

Fuentes once asked, "How can we invent more fantastical characters than Cortez and Pizarro, more sinister than Santa Ana or Rosas, more tragicomic than Trujillo or Batista?" García Márquez' answer seems to be, through invention of appropriate form. Both writers remind us in their neo-Baroque nightmares of Fuseli, Magnasco, Piranesi, Goya. Their penchant is for decay, obsession, madness. But it is García Márquez who grips us in an authentic nightmare of modern dictatorship.

Two other recently translated novels deserve attention, Vladimir Voi-

novich's satire of Ivan Chonkin (1970)³ and Heinrich Böll's *The Bread of Those Early Years* (1955).⁴ Voinovich grew up on a state farm in Russia and was a common laborer in the Crimea before launching a career as self-appointed gadfly to the Soviet state. His satire is so colloquial and dependent on in-jokes that it must have been difficult to translate. But the story of chuckle-headed Chonkin, the inept soldier who fuddles the system, sometimes touches deeper emotions. The opening section is dull, even after the explanation that it ridicules the sacred Soviet ideal of beautiful peasant life. Wonderfully, however, that rapidity acquires mythic proportions in moments worthy of Saltykov-Shchedrin's *Golovlyovs*:

Then Chonkin looked up at the clear sky and said: "It looks like we'll have good weather today."

"Good weather, if it doesn't rain."

"You don't get rain without clouds," remarked Chonkin.

"Without clouds, that's right, no rain."

"Sometimes you get clouds and still you don't get rain."

"Sometimes you do," agreed Lyosha.

The conclusion involves some inspired slapstick in which an addled soldier (the date is 1941) is captured by his own superiors, both parties trying to speak a pidgin-German with the devious enemy. It's good to know that the spirit of Gogol has survived, however crudely, in so unexpected a figure.

Heinrich Böll's poignant nouvelle of 1955, by contrast, comes through so beautifully in English translation that one wonders why it had to wait more than twenty years. It comprises a day in the life of a young washing-machine repairman, a day when he falls out of love with bourgeois complacency, greed, the work ethic, and hypocritical "reasonableness." It is the day he falls in love, fatally and completely, with a girl known slightly in earlier years of hunger, lovelessness and humiliation. The compulsion of this love is not romance but memory: the discovered need to embrace those buried events and denied fears. When hero meets girl, he knows only the "fear explorers must feel when they step onto new land, knowing that another expedition is on the way . . . explorers who, after the ordeal of the long journey, all its hardships, the gamble of life and death, must fear that their struggle may have been in vain." Set against the background of a reconstructed Germany where the horrors and hungers of the war have supposedly vanished for good, Böll's lucid narrative throws its moral light relentlessly backward. Episodes of spite, envy and venality are sketched in concise vignettes. Metaphors have the consistency and suggestiveness of well-wrought poems: the series of valuable machines that self-destruct (watches, washers, machine-made lives); the imagery of light, to evoke work, duty and daylight reasonableness, played against dark things,

³ THE LIFE AND EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES OF PRIVATE IVAN CHONKIN, by *Vladimir Voinovich*. Trans. from the Russian by Richard Lourie. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. \$10.

⁴ THE BREAD OF THOSE EARLY YEARS, by *Heinrich Böll*. Trans. from the German by Leila Vennewitz. McGraw Hill. \$7.95.

memories, sufferings, photographic “negatives”; and the obsessive motif of blood-red. At the end the narrator explains it as the dye one pours into a spring to trace its reach: “but it may be years before you find the dyed water someplace you didn’t expect to.” The story affirms nothing about future love and denies any impulse to revel in “pointless weighing of guilt and innocence.” It celebrates only the desire to see clearly into the dark past. I have long admired *The Clown* and *Billiards at Half-Past Nine* without feeling too sure about the success of their artifice, but this beautiful and blest work is unflawed.

Among recent short story collections,⁵ there is much to enjoy but nothing to provoke the yodels of excited discovery. Samuel Beckett adds a series of eight *Fizzles* to his growing list of ends and odds, dramaticules, and texts for nothing. How much farther, one wonders, can he paint himself into his literary corner? These gnomic fragments, all that remains from a chopping away of connectives, syntax, verbs, reminds me of the Thurber character who condensed a long mystery story into the word “Bang!” Sylvia Townsend Warner, now in her eighty-third year, has issued her answer to Tolkien, a series of stories about elfins, written in a flawless Brothers Grimm style but too winsome by half. Their typical theme is the impoverished imagination of most mortals, but I found myself preferring the mortals when I wasn’t supposed to, like the lady bicyclist who gets drunk and brings stench into the nice elfin castle. Daniel Menaker’s carefully understated stories owe much to Malamud, especially in the way they treat hardness of the heart and false selves surrendered. They suffer from a mechanical cleverness, however, a weakness for the gag line that destroys credibility:

“Cut it out,” she said. “You’ve got to make a decision about me.” “I don’t got to do anything,” I said. “Except my laundry. Come to my place and we’ll talk over a hot cup of Clorox.”

Menaker might still get away with this glibness if the other dimensions of his characters were larger. C. E. Poverman writes of India, Hawaii, and Iowa with a sure instinct for the physical sensations of his young male protagonists, muscular, erotic, prone to violence. This is well contrasted with their total incuriosity about themselves. Narcissistic, hostile to all formulas, driven by contradictory hungers, they may have no real selves, but Poverman isn’t saying whether that’s good or bad. Ruth Praver Jhabvala must be the gentlest of all these story writers, and her comic sense has the greatest humanity. Listen for a moment to the innocent narrator of her title story:

Quite a few of the foreign disciples locked their [doors] for purposes I never cared to inquire into. At first I used to pretend to myself they were

⁵ *FIZZLES*, by Samuel Beckett. Grove Press. \$6.95. *KINGDOMS OF ELFIN*, by Sylvia Townsend Warner. Viking, \$8.95. *FRIENDS AND RELATIONS*, by Daniel Menaker. Doubleday. \$6.95. *THE BLACK VELVET GIRL*, by C. E. Poverman. University of Iowa. \$8.95. *HOW I BECAME A HOLY MOTHER*, by Ruth Praver Jhabvala. Harper and Row. \$8.95. *SLEEP IT OFF, LADY*, by Jean Rhys. Harper and Row. \$7.95.

sleeping, and afterwards I didn't care what they were doing. I mean, even if they weren't sleeping, I felt there was something just as good and innocent about what they actually *were* doing. And after a while—when we had told each other the story of our respective lives and had run out of conversation—Vishwa and I began to do it too.

What's missing here is dramatic urgency, both in language and action. These tales will appeal to anyone curious about Indian life and they are free of any artiness, but their subtle low key ultimately defeats them. By contrast, the hardness of Jean Rhys's stories makes them much more memorable. Although she's working in a formula that Somerset Maugham polished off years ago, her gossipy West Indian colonials are struck off without any wasted motions, and the sorrows of her English girls haven't a trace of sentimentality. One of them concludes, "Some other night, perhaps, another sort of man." So love passes, memories fade, and the tears dry quickly.

Out of this welter of familiar, old-style storytelling comes Donald Barthelme, still the boldest, freshest talent around, even in his sixth collection, *Amateurs*.⁶ Barthelme's work often seems merely playful when found in the midst of *New Yorker* cartoons and squibs; it should be read in collections, where his obsessions cannot be mistaken for mere tricks. *Amateurs*, as attested by the publisher's blurb and the dust jacket depicting Cupid and Psyche, concerns love or would-be lovers. But what Barthelme also means by the title is amateurism. To see this is to discover the enemy in professionalism, a modern disease long rampant in Barthelme's fiction. In the first story, "Our Work and Why We Do It," the manic professionalism of the printers ("our job is to kiss the paper"; "We do the *Oxford Book of American Grub*") grows violent the more it is threatened by the disruptions of love, suffering, injustice, or significant meaning. They "love" to print matchbook covers, fingerprints, "admirable volumes" of "carefully justified prose," and telephone poles. The lover in this story ("if only he would take his hands off Rowena's hip bones during office hours") happens also to be the boss, fount of the company's "great ideas." Not even Rowena is spared: "You are totally wired," goes her parody of tenderness.

In "Some of Us Had Been Threatening Our Friend Colby" a committee decides to hang Colby because, in some unspecified way, he has "gone too far." Everyone is expert at committee procedures but rotten at friendship. How should the invitations to the event be worded? Should Ives's Fourth Symphony be played? Would an expensive gibbet be preferable to a nice oak tree? And how can one make sure the hangman is "a professional, a real hangman, and not just some money-hungry amateur who might bungle the job and shame us all, in front of everybody"? Asked to hang himself, Colby performs like a pro. In "The School" the teacher is the amateur. Everything alive brought into the room dies: plants, snakes, gerbils, fish ("the lesson plan called for a tropical-fish input"), followed by a Korean orphan, several parents and two more classmates. Perfect trans-

⁶ AMATEURS, by Donald Barthelme. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. \$7.95.

mitters of our profession-ridden culture, the children ask about death: "Isn't death, considered as a fundamental datum, the means by which the taken-for-granted mundanity of the everyday may be transcended?" Then, still amateurs, they ask teacher for an unprofessional demonstration of love with his attractive teaching assistant. One embrace and a few amateurish kisses produce a knock on the door, "and the new gerbil walked in."

A master of mimicry, Barthelme makes expert collages of our numerous jargons and exposes their transcendent emptiness. What makes his stories more than sophisticated mockeries, however, is his bleak demonstration that language debases everything. One character says, "Intellectual rigor demands that we give these damned metaphors every chance, even if they are inimical to personal well-being and comfort." No matter how sincerely we may suffer or love or hunger, Barthelme shows, communication of these feelings is condemned to anonymity, self-parody, mechanism. More than his previous books *Amateurs* records the accelerating loss of our individualities. Jargons that once seemed classifiable now tend to collapse into a common lingo. "What to Do Next" and "The Agreement" offer the best examples of this fatality. The former gives step-by-step advice for "starting fresh" after bereavement (disaster can be "downgraded to the rank of severe inconvenience by the application of corrected thinking"). The latter story is a self-catechism, proceeding in an infinite regress, delivered by an anguished parent who has just been reading the jargon of a separation agreement. Where once Barthelme could affirm the freedom of creative imagination and offer an escape from the dead weight of mass-produced jargons (e.g., "A Shower of Gold," 1963), now he will not. His amateur hero has been so hemmed in by professionals haranguing him from all sides that they have succeeded at last in estranging him completely from himself. Barthelme's detractors like to say his stories have no real feeling, and it's true he regularly fails to make us imagine passionate love. But he fails deliberately, as these stories show, because we fail to have any authentic language for it. The only consolation is a wacky sense of humor, bordering on hysteria.

The puzzle of Kingsley Amis's twelfth novel, *The Alteration*,⁷ is why he chose the subject in the first place. Its issue is whether Hubert Anvil, a ten-year-old boy blessed with an extraordinary soprano voice, shall be castrated to preserve his gift. Even to manufacture this problem for 1976 requires that Amis do away with the Reformation and reconstitute the subsequent history as if Roman Catholicism had dominated it. Much of the novel's wit comes in response to this gambit: Luther went to Rome and became a Pope; so did Thomas More; Henry VIII's older brother Arthur married Catherine of Aragon; Christendom fights the infidel Turk. Only in a small region of America are there free-thinking "schismatics"; their major city is named for Benedict Arnold. More progressive than the Romanist world, they still keep Indians as slaves. Waterloo Station is named instead "Dahnang," to commemorate "the victory of the French in

⁷ THE ALTERATION, by Kingsley Amis. Viking. \$7.95.

1815 whereby the whole of Indo-China had passed under the English Crown." And so on. But to what real purpose? It amounts to a toying with history. Why imagine a Father Bond instead of James or Jean-Paul Sartre as a Jesuit cardinal?

One answer is that the full peculiarity of the way we now live cannot be appreciated unless we imagine it as wholly different. Amis uses this argument in *New Maps of Hell* to justify the "ten-clawed monsters" of science fiction. So in the first chapter of *The Alteration* two fat Roman *castrati* find the London street "careless, bumptious, over-liberal, negligent of order." Similarly, the inexorable logic of Hubert Anvil's castration—for the greater glory of God and His Church—may be construed as indirect celebration of opposite things: freedom, individuality, sexuality, all the natural disorderly human appetites. Still, the strategem seems round-about, oversubtle. "My original reason for adopting this device," Amis says in a prefatory note, "was that the main situation of the story, referred to in the title, could never have happened in the world we know." Again, why *this* subject?

The "main situation," we learn, involves more than one talent. Hubert is as promising a musical composer as performer. In the most delicate and sensuous scene of the novel, Hubert walks dreamily in a pasture while a new composition begins in his mind: "There were two melodies that immediately and necessarily involved the same harmonic structure, but they would not fit within it together, and each resisted alteration to make it conform with its fellow." Noting "alteration" we read on: a third melody appears and "revealed itself as the air on which the other two were variations," followed by "two further variations and a central episode in the tonic minor." Not only does Amis make this creative process exciting in itself, but it enlarges his whole theme. Art, like life, may not be coerced; it discovers possibilities and finds harmony in apparent discord. Hubert's proposed alteration is hateful not because he would forego the pleasures of sex, marriage, or parenthood but because it destroys creative freedom and makes art mere decoration, opulent repetition. Imagine the modern world, Amis seems to say, without this freedom. Politically and socially we might be no worse off, all things considered, but a world where Kyd's *Hamlet* survives and not Shakespeare's? Turner as a painter of commemorative pageantry on ceilings? Blake doing frescoes of St. Augustine? Poe a war hero after whom a ship is named? Better the fate of Shelley, who in this world commits suicide after setting fire to Castle Gandolfo, or that of Anthony Burgess: "Interesting lad, Burgess [says the Pope]. It's a mortal pity he had to go and . . . Well, as we said, we do what we must do." Amis lets us imagine what violent "alteration" Burgess might have merited in the sterile grandeur of this regime. But the ultimate flaw in this tactic is its flat assumption that an artist cannot be castrated. Well, no. Taken as a metaphor, that's so by definition: artists are no more nor less than those who create. Taken literally, the case is either too special (can a castrated man write an oratorio?) or too crude (does creativity depend on the presence of sexual glands?). How odd to have such a witty, scheming and skillfully written novel fail ultimately for its deficient thought.

Iris Murdoch's novels continue to be interesting because the ideas that originally animated them still obsess her and because she resists simplifying them. It is no secret that her characters and situations have become stock. I would hazard that she turns out novel year after year not because the formula is perfect or the money pleasant but because the spiritual craving persists. How to convey one more time the opacity of persons and the mysteries of freedom? Viking's blurb quotes her revealingly: "I try to prolong the early stage of inventing as long as possible. Once it is written, it ceases to be flexible. I always work out the plot closely, making a very detailed synopsis of the whole thing before I write a word." A wordless period of exploration and evolving possibilities, followed and perhaps spoiled by an inflexible plot: no wonder she must always begin again.

It is remarkable how much of her latest, *Henry and Cato*,⁸ may be referred to Murdoch's essay "Against Dryness" (*Encounter*, January, 1961), where she cautioned against an art that offers consolation instead of truth. We console ourselves, she said in 1961, with myths and stories, fantasies and magic, assuming we are free to know the real world according to our own images:

We need to return from the self-centered concept of sincerity to the other-centred concept of truth. We are not isolated free-choosers, monarchs of all we survey, but benighted creatures sunk in a reality whose nature we are constantly and overwhelmingly tempted to deform by fantasy.

Most of the characters in *Henry and Cato* suffer from this malady. Henry Marshalson fancies himself an art historian in America, then a stand-in for his late brother (inheriting a mistress as well as the family estate), then an idealistic social reformer (he will sell the estate and give away the money). Cato Forbes thinks he is free to become a Catholic priest, then free to lose his faith and become father-protector to Beautiful Joe of the slums. When these illusions are ripped away, he decides (literally in the dark, victim of his self-centered sincerity), "my only duty now is to hold onto myself, to keep a sort of fruitless dignity . . . Now there is only me left in the world, me and my relation to me." Henry's mother Gerda consoles herself for the loss of her husband with her first son, the loss of him with Henry; at the end she understands "no consolation was possible" and is the better for that. The aged Lucius Lamb fancies himself Gerda's lover and "consoled himself by looking into the mirror."

These self-deceptions might be comic if Murdoch had failed to give weight to their appeal. What she is best at, however, are moments when occasions of intense fantasy disclose something more real. In Henry's veritable orgy of possessing his brother's estate (just as it's an "orgy of will," later, to get rid of it), he falls prey to an inexplicable desolation: "Was there some ritual, some ceremony of possession, for which he was never to become worthy?" Still feeling excluded, "lacking the key to

⁸ HENRY AND CATO, by Iris Murdoch. Viking. \$8.95.

enchantment," he senses his need "to see man," as Murdoch wrote in 1961, "against a background of values, of realities, which transcend him." Richly figured in the family tapestry, in Gerda's brocade robes, and in the natural world, Henry's background at last comes to possess him. Cato keeps trying to surrender his background, even at the end, frightened at the discovery of dimensions of himself—egotist, homosexual, martyr, murderer—that his fantasy self cannot tolerate. But he cannot surrender. His crucifix, "heavy and awkward inside his mackintosh pocket, banged irregularly against his thigh at each step."

What undercuts the complex moral design of this novel, and so many of Murdoch's others, is its crystalline plot. It caters to the reader's weakness for magic and fantasy, and tends to cancel the mysteries and opacities of the real world. It schematizes experience even as it condemns characters who do the same. Trying to conceal the fact that her scheme is there, Murdoch clutters the story with details that fail to be mysterious. And once again, instead of the articulation of "the difficulty and complexity of the moral life," she offers mainly an intellectual entertainment.

Nothing undercuts the complex moral design of Patrick White's ninth novel, *A Fringe of Leaves*.⁹ Set in Van Dieman's Land (Tasmania) in 1836, it borrows the expansive form of George Eliot and Henry James to create a moral fable of the most intense and unsparing kind. If "Heart of Darkness" dramatizes the fragile "saving" illusions that separate us from savagery and *Lord of the Flies* destroys any illusion that savage and civilized behaviors are essentially different, the *A Fringe of Leaves* takes the final step: civilization may well be worse than the savage state. American readers will recognize the resemblance of White's fable to the captivity narrative: a series of ordeals and privations, usually suffered by a woman, leading to a recognition of one's real relation to God and nature.

Married to an effete gentleman, Ellen Roxburgh endures the lust of his reprobate brother, shipwreck, starvation in an open boat, a stillborn infant, the drowning of a cabin boy she favored, the bloody death of her husband, capture by savages, and the consequent hunger, nakedness, filth, pain and fear at their hands. She is forced to recognize all her basest appetites. She keeps only a fringe of leaves about her, and her wedding band. Prayer, unlike roasted snake, sticks in her throat: "What she longed to sense in the behavior of these human beings was evidence of a spiritual design, but that she could not, any more than she could believe in a merciful power shaping her own destiny. She learns instead the merciless beauty of nature, the ecstasy of her own appetites, the liberation of her childhood spirit, and her deep need for love. Captivity brings, to her dismay, rebirth, freedom. White's most daring instance of this is Ellen's unforced act of cannibalism. Driven more strongly by identification with her captors than by "civilized" horror, "She was less disgusted . . . than awed by the fact that she had been moved to do it. The exquisite innocence of this forest morning, its quiet broken by a single flute-note endlessly repeated, tempted her to believe that she had partaken of a sacrament."

⁹ A FRINGE OF LEAVES, by Patrick White. Viking. \$10.

Robie Macauley reads this episode as the nadir of her experience, and for him Ellen's return to civilization dwindles off inconclusively (*New York Times Book Review*, Jan. 30, 1977). But the deeper meaning of White's fable depends on this conclusion. The return proves to be a much greater ordeal and a worse captivity. Civilization becomes a penal colony where the sexes are separated and punished for their disruptive desires. Woman is either the slave of her husband or the cause of his crime. The world conspires to cover all the knowledge Ellen so painfully earned in the wild. Clothing, words, customs, shame—everything emphasizes the tyrannic rigidity of civilization, the thickness of its many layers. Ellen finds that law, justice, and reason all violate the meaning of her experience, and will frustrate absolutely her desire to free herself from her role or the man who helped her escape from his punishment. White's final sardonic thrust is to make the harmless Miss Scrimshaw, whom we met at the start, into a cockeyed hypocrite, gushing about her free spirit but clinging smugly to her illusions of an ordered universe.

Occasionally White hints at better answers than Ellen's final impasse: her rescuer's return to the tribe, another survivor's resort to a private religion. The novel's strength, however, lies in its refusal of all answers and the suspense of its counter-commentaries up to the last word. Lawrencian in its anger and Jamesian in its patiently elaborated nuance, *A Fringe of Leaves* offers passage after passage of elegant, relentlessly hard prose. This when the husband dies: "Round the mouth, and on one smeared temple, more transparent than she had ever seen it, flies were crowding in black clots, greedy for the least speck of crimson before the sun dried the virtue out of it." Or this when Ellen yields to the reprobate brother:

She was again this great green, only partially disabled, obscene bird, on whose breast he was feeding, gross hands parting the sweeping folds of her tormented and tormenting plumage; until in opening and closing, she might have been rather, the green, fathomless sea, tossing, threatening to swallow down the humanly manned ship which had ventured on her.

Indeed, it is a complex mind and sensibility that can make a fringe of leaves into iron.

Admirers of Theodore Weesner's *The Car Thief* (1972) should know that his second novel, *A German Affair*,¹⁰ is much shorter, only a nouvelle, but just as fine. Weesner can make you care, even though you've heard the story a hundred times before. This protagonist is Billy Khol, an eighteen-year-old GI in Stuttgart, getting his first glimpse of the world beyond Detroit. Prostitutes give a blunt version of what he's looking for; and an affair with an older woman, the disturbed Ursula, yields equal portions of love and frustration. Fortunately it yields something else besides, as valuable as it is wholly unexpected:

How odd to feel this affection for a country. This infatuation. This world of comic books, of madness, of horror. But of other things as well, of

¹⁰ *A GERMAN AFFAIR*, by Theodore Weesner. Random House. \$6.95.

things too deep within him to be able to explain. To think that he might have thoughts and a mind of his own. As if there was another Germany out there after all, a region which no one dared to mention.

As the boy loses the guilt, self-hate and despair that have soured his life, he uncovers both a new person in himself and the whole extraordinary world outside. Haltingly, experience brings pain, brings understanding, brings honesty, character, vision. Weesner is guilty of some "poetic" writing at the start, and his chapter titles are ill-advised; but what other writer today could transform Germany this way? To have "an accurate eye" is the young soldier's ambition: "To be able to see things clearly." Weesner not only has that eye, but reminds us how rare the gift is.

During the last four decades John Cheever has written masterful short stories, two family-chronicle novels loosely stitched together, and a bitter allegory of suburbia. Ever since "The Enormous Radio" he has been crowding stories together, trying to find an appropriate form that would shape and direct them. Now at last he has found it. *Falconer*¹¹ is his definitive statement: a gloomy-gray narrative of the Country Husband gone to prison in order to learn the meaning of freedom, love, goodness, and hope. There are innumerable stories within it besides the narrator's, crowded in like the men: "the Cuckold" who makes bracelets out of stolen spoons, in for "icing" his wife; "Tennis" whose prowess ended long before he started writing bad checks; "Chicken Number Two", the jewel thief terrified yet eager for death; Jody the homosexual who becomes for awhile the narrator's lover, a cynical graduate of "Charm School, Success School, Elite School," who manages to hustle his way out of Falconer Prison.

Cheever allows nothing in these stories to seem worse or better than the experiences of the narrator, Ezekiel Farragut, whose Biblical counterpart also learned the meaning of captivity. Educated, affluent, "privileged" though he may be, Farragut's sufferings are equally human. His wife Marcia, whom he still loves, seldom returns anything but resentment and criticism; he has killed his self-righteous brother, Eben; his mother was incapable of love and his father never wanted him born; he's been alcoholic and had heart attacks; now he's on methadone recovering from heroin addiction. As Cheever remarks in "The Leaves, the Lion-Fish, and the Bear" (segments of this 1972 story are used verbatim in *Falconer*), "When violence or tragedy happens, the local paper always points out that it happened in a two hundred-thousand dollar house with a beautifully landscaped swimming pool—as if there were some connection between real-estate values and serenity." When a black convict strums his guitar and sings with a voice "sophisticated in its bluegrass flatness," he sings equally for Farragut: "If the only song I can sing is a sad song,/ I aint going to sing at all." They are all sophisticated in suffering.

Cheever evokes this grim world in a style as unadorned as the walls of Falconer itself: blunt, hard, and frequently strewn with obscenities. But it provides the right frame for light to shine through. Thinking he rejects religious experience ("perilous rubbish"), Farragut experiences it repeat-

¹¹ *FALCONER*, by John Cheever. Knopf. \$7.95.

edly. The prison tries to teach him he “never experienced or tasted or imagined the greatness of immodesty.” (There has long been a pagan element in Cheever’s Christianity.) But Farragut’s memories and blocked desires teach him otherwise. In a series of momentary, transcendent visions, he knows “the mysteriousness of the bonded spirit and the flesh,” days of “incomparable beauty,” the human groping “toward some understanding of the triumph of our beginnings and our ends,” the ultimate “majesty of the realm,” even his wife’s “limitless beauty.” The only obscenities are shame, humiliation, lovelessness, and merciless judgment. Farragut killed his brother—as so many of his predecessors in Cheever’s world almost did—in a moment when Eben seemed to embody all these evils. Farragut learns in prison, however, that people tend to see evils disproportionately: it may be invincible but it throws so little light! He can escape Falconer at the end because he has recovered his “immodest” sense of human possibility. Free at last, he stumbles; he hears music from a darkened house; he approaches a “rectangle of pure light.” Someone gives him a coat, sympathy, an address. His climactic thought is “re-joice.” That is Cheever’s definitive statement; he has offered it movingly before, but never so profoundly and confidently as this.

While we’re on bended knee, let’s take a look at Joan Didion’s masterful third novel, *A Book of Common Prayer*.¹² On its first page she quietly makes reference not to Cranmer but to Ford Madox Ford. “Charlotte would call her story one of passion. I believe I would call it one of delusion.” Not just the subtitle of *The Good Soldier* but its slow-learning narrator, its romantic protagonist, its disordered siftings of the past, its overlappings and repetitions; all the book owes much to Ford. In perfect control of this difficult form, Didion writes with an inspiration entirely her own. The first-person narrator is Grace Strasser-Mendana, a widowed American woman dying of cancer who owns much of Boca Grande, which is the hypothetical Central American state where the story begins and ends. She undertakes to give an account of the confused life and pointless death of Mrs. Charlotte Douglas, whose two marriages and two daughters have variously died. We are told it “does not matter who ‘I’ am,” but in fact it matters a great deal. The narrator distrusts most people’s words, pointing out bitingly their imprecisions, lies and evasions; she prefers the clear terminology of her own scientific papers. Or so she thinks. Her portrait of Charlotte begins with unsparing criticism, near contempt: “it was characteristic of Charlotte that whenever the phrase ‘realistic but optimistic’ appeared in a school communiqué she read it as ‘realistic and optimistic.’” Thinking about the ambiguity of existence in the tropics, she tries to tell Charlotte “A banana palm is no more or less ‘alive’ than its rot,” but Charlotte again does “not quite see my point.” For she is a childish romantic: “Every memory was ‘lyrical,’ every denouement ‘hilarious,’ and sometimes ‘ironic’ as well.” It seems her enthusiasm would be charming if it weren’t so ignorant: “She used words as a seven-year-old might, as if she had heard them and liked their adult sound but had only the haziest idea of their meaning . . .”

¹² A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, by Joan Didion. Simon and Schuster. \$8.95.

But the narrator comes to appreciate contradictions in Charlotte—she's squeamish yet tough, naive yet experienced, selfish yet deeply feeling—things that resist classification. Subtly our sympathies are shifted. We learn that Charlotte has been surrounded too long by sophisticated, highly verbal, ironic people. Here's the way her bitter husband, Warren Bogart, sneers about her new life: "Excuse me. I mean your 'life-style.' You don't have a life, you have a 'life-style.' You still look good though." Once as her English instructor at Berkeley Warren angrily tore in half an essay she wrote. Her second husband, Leonard Douglas, is a lawyer whose professional attitude toward his wife's sensibility veers from tolerant condescension to angry sarcasm. He's brilliant at law, not love. Charlotte adopts a defensive irony, but her heart is not in it: "that's pretty much what happens everywhere, isn't it," she says. "Somebody cuts you? Where it doesn't show?" Once the narrator apologizes, "It was a joke. Irony." "Is cheap," Charlotte replies. In some ways Charlotte shares this universal habit of criticizing words. She writes a letter to a newspaper objecting to its phrase for her, "reclusive socialite," as a contradiction in terms. And nobody in this novel full of word critics suffers more than Charlotte over false terms, from her daughter's crazy revolutionist jargon to the language on her baby's death certificate.

The intricate plot resists summary because it depends on innumerable, subtly re-forming and enlarging impressions. What happens, simply, is that we are gradually led to appreciate why Charlotte made no move to escape when revolution came to Boca Grande, and thus assured her own death. That revolution is played off against Charlotte's series of domestic upheavals, not least of which is her daughter's share in hijacking an airliner in California. As the narrator acidly observes, revolutions are made "entirely by people we know." Balancing these destructions, however, is the spiritual revolution of the narrator, who learns Charlotte's full tragedy as the scales drop from her eyes. Not only does Didion succeed in making a retrospective novel move with tautness and suspense, but in focusing its moral issues perfectly. Linguists and philosophers will not be surprised to learn that the deepest issue is language, but Didion's interest is purely moral: to show the ways people haggle about words when they want to defend themselves, attack each other, preserve illusion, prevent thought, and justify revolution. Everyone argues about the proper terms and the right names for things, or else assumes his own words are right and best. Appropriately, *boca grande* means "big mouth." The narrator once voices her author's underlying conception: "I had never before had so graphic an illustration of how the consciousness of the human organism is carried in its grammar." Didion shows both the necessity of this argument about language—is there a fit language to convey Charlotte's tragedy?—and the swath of destruction it cuts. Her ear for ironic repetitions and satiric jabs is wickedly entertaining at first, then disturbing. How desperately we need a common language in which our common weaknesses and sufferings might be shared, not Esperanto, but a Book of Common Prayer.

GUY DAVENPORT

Making It Uglier to the Airport

EVERY BUILDING IN THE UNITED STATES IS AN OFFENSE to invested capital. It occupies space which, as greed acknowledges no limits, can be better utilized. This depressing fact can be thought of as a kind of disease of the American city for which the only specific is law, and, to make a wild gesture toward common sense, aesthetics. One might as well say that multiple sclerosis can be cured with cough drops.

In Chicago six years ago they tore down Adler and Sullivan's Old Stock Exchange, a perfectly useful building. That it was bone and blood of Chicago history, that it was an architectural landmark, that its ornamentation was beautiful and irreplaceable were arguments that could not save it. Money has no ears, no eyes, no respect; it is all gut, mouth, and ass. The Heller International Building went up in its place, a glass cracker-box forty-three stories high. Its mortgage payments are \$400,000 every first of the month: interest—*interest*, money which bankers earn by tightening their shoe-laces, yawning, and testing teakwood surfaces for dust—on a \$48,300,000 loan. The building cost \$51,000,000, and is up for grabs, as the speculators can't hold onto it. This time nobody cares if, as they shall, they tear it down and put up something more "economically viable," as they say.

Heaps of New York are being torn down because what's left over after property taxes isn't quite what our greedy hearts would like to take to our investment broker. Between the banker and the tax-collector, life can be very hell. But then, they built the cities in the first place. One of the greatest of architects built snow-men for the Medici children (a use of Michelangelo we would have expected of J. Pierpont Morgan sooner than Lorenzo the Magnificent); all architects are now sculptors in ice.

Ada Louise Huxtable, who writes about architecture and city planning for *The New York Times*, has collected up a batch of her terse essays on buildings going up and coming down, on design, and practically anything else that her lively eye hits on.¹ Her comments are all arrows of the chase, released when the aim seemed good, and with some fine hits. Like all such writing, you can feel the pressure of the deadline on her attention. She turns up many problems (the war, apparently to the death, between city design and real-estate adventurers; the coherence of American cityscape; the preservation of landmarks; the tension between contemporaneity and tradition) that I would like to have seen her expand and explore.

While I was reading her essays, I happened to run across Manfredo Tafuri's *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development*, which I saw in the MIT catalogue when I was ordering Dolores Hayden's fine

¹ KICKED A BUILDING LATELY?, by Ada Louise Huxtable. Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Co. \$12.50.

survey of American utopian communities.² Tafuri traces the decay and disorder of cities to the rise of commercial centers during the industrial revolution, causing cities to enter a paranoia of identity. His little book is worth reading—worth studying with care—but it gleams and blinds with too much Marxist intellect for me to pretend to discuss it here. The one idea that I want to take from it is that what we call a city bears little resemblance to the historical city or to cities outside the United States. Yet our cities still sit on top of a living archeological base that used to be a city in the old sense. The automobile and the truck have shaved the yards to mere margins in the quiet residential sections, the streets have become freeways all over every city and town. Automobile exhaust, equal in volume daily to that of the Atlantic ocean, has replaced breathable air. The automobile is an insect that eats cities, and its parking lots are a gangrene.

The simple fact is that cities in America came into being not as the historical city did, for mutual protection and to be the home of a specific family of people, but as commercial ports. That is, their model was the kind of prosperous city Defoe describes in the first inventory the mercantile class made of itself, his *Tour Thro' the whole Island of Great Britain* (1724–26). All important elements were in walking distance of each other; *nearness* defined the city. If it grew large, each neighborhood (as in Paris and London today) remained a conglomerate of components within easy reach.

Within the last twenty years the automobile has gradually cancelled this definition of the city as a community. And the smaller the city, the larger the inconvenience has grown. When I moved to Lexington, Kentucky, fifteen years ago, I could walk to three supermarkets in my neighborhood, to the post office, and to the mayor's house, which happened to be around the corner. All three markets have moved miles away, to the belt line; God knows where they have put the post office. I have been there but once since they moved it. It took me an hour to get there, and an hour to get back. It is technically in the next county, and is near no habitation of any citizen. Only some desolate warehouses does it have for company. This happened when Nixon and his government of scoundrels, liars and sneaks had us *scrotum in mano* and I assumed that sheer hatefulness snatched the post office from downtown and put it out in the horse pastures.

The post office, in any case, was only good for buying stamps at. When I tried to renew my passport there a few years ago, a passport kept functional for thirty years, I was told that if I couldn't show a driver's license I couldn't renew my passport. (I will not spin out the Gogolian scene that ensued, though it featured my being told that I didn't deserve to live in this country, my pointing out that I could scarcely leave it without a passport, and on around in circles that left the art of Gogol for that of

² ARCHITECTURE AND UTOPIA: DESIGN AND CAPITALIST DEVELOPMENT, by *Manfredo Tafuri*. Trans. from the Italian by *Barbara Luigia La Penta*. The MIT Press. \$10. SEVEN AMERICAN UTOPIAS: THE ARCHITECTURE OF COMMUNITARIAN SOCIALISM, 1790-1975, by *Dolores Hayden*. The MIT Press. \$16.95.

Ionesco, until I got the State Department on the phone, and had my new passport, together with an apology, in three days.) The point of the anecdote is that the pedestrian is officially a second-rate citizen and definitely an obsolete species.

Where the mayor moved to I do not know. The neighborhood is now zoned for business. Henry Clay's townhouse, part of the neighborhood, sits in a tarred-over parking lot.³

I had not realized before reading Dolores Hayden's *Seven American Utopias* that the Civil War marked the end of utopian experimentation in American communities. We now know how very much of modern design derives from Shaker clarity and integrity, and how useful, if only as models to modify or tolerate, the Owenite, Fourierist, Moravian, and other eccentric societies were.

Acceleration in culture is demonic, and there ought to be periodic recesses to look back and reclaim elements that were ditched along the way. To read Dolores Hayden is to see how much we elbowed aside, or smothered, or deliberately obliterated. Fourier's phalanx seems to be a congenial mode of life that might have forestalled our present alienation of the young, the old, and the lonely. Shaker respect for materials is certainly the corrective we need for our present norm of tacky shoddiness, for mushroom proliferation. Shaker morals wouldn't be amiss either.

Backward surveys can also turn up some astonishing forks in the road. Alison Sky and Michelle Stone have compiled what amounts to a treasury of American designs, from cities to individual buildings, that never made it from the blueprint into actuality.⁴ One purpose of this book was to assess our architectural legacy—designs, for instance, that might still be realized. There is a post-mortem career awaiting Frank Lloyd Wright; all great architects are ahead of their times. Sadly, many of these plans have been chucked into the wastebasket. An architect's firm is a business, not an archive. Not even so distinguished a figure as Frederick Law Olmsted was spared this kind of careless destruction. A vigorous society might well build Thomas Jefferson's President's House, if only in Disneyland, where, in effect, Jacques J. B. Benedict's Summer Capitol for President Woodrow Wilson (projected for Mt. Falcon, Colorado) already stands—it looks like an Arthur Rackham drawing for Mad Ludwig of Bavaria. Many of these rejected designs are lugubrious and hilarious: a robber-baron New Versailles for Manhasset Bay, Long Island, that would have been the biggest building in the world, something that Hitler and Albert Speer might have drooled over; art-book cathedrals recapitulating the whole span of the Gothic in Europe, beacons taller than Everest, Babylonian banks, war

³ There is an excellent essay on the kinds of cities bequeathed us by history as paradigms, in *Salmagundi* No. 24 (Fall 1973), "The City under Attack" by George Steiner. This is a rich essay, with long historical perspectives. He shows us that much of what we take to be peculiarly modern ills are in fact very old, and that our double tradition, Classical and Judaeo-Christian, gives us two distinct ideas of what a city is.

⁴ **UNBUILT AMERICA: FORGOTTEN ARCHITECTURE IN THE UNITED STATES FROM THOMAS JEFFERSON TO THE SPACE AGE**, by Alison Sky and Michelle Stone. McGraw-Hill. \$14.95.

memorials that would have trivialized the Pyramids, linear towns with highways for halls, space islands, underground metropolises, a New Harmony phalanx that looks like a Victorian penitentiary crossbred with Flash Gordon's spacecraft port. And yet these designs are full of attractive and charming ideas: a Manhattan with separate thoroughfares for pedestrians and traffic, garden cities, beautiful vistas that would have made Chicago as handsome as Paris, and buildings that ought to have existed for the fun of it, William McKinley Xanadus, palaces, follies—outrageous flowers for the granite forest.

The depressing obliteration of communities can sometimes be as thorough as Noah's Flood. New Burlington, Ohio, a town between Dayton and Cincinnati, is now at the bottom of a lake created, as it often seems, to keep the Army Corps of Engineers busy. Before New Burlington went under, an extraordinarily sensitive writer, John Baskin, talked with the old-timers and recorded their memories. The resulting book is poignant and, if you're in a reflective mood or of a pessimistic turn, heart-breaking.⁵ The obituary of an entire town has the aura of doom all over it. The only horror of death is in waiting for it, and here was a community that knew its doom: not of life, but of so much of it that the difference perhaps is not accountable. The terror of Hektor's death was that, moments before his heart tasted Achilles' blade, he had to run past places where he had played as a boy. John Baskin carefully avoids dramatics in this book. His business was to hear the past. In the process, however, it dawned on him that American life has changed. What's different is that whereas just a few years ago we all had something to do, now we don't.

It is tempting to believe that New Burlington, Ohio, was built before the Civil War (partly by Methodists, partly by Quakers) by people for whom skill and hard work was as natural a fact as breathing, and that it went under water because a society had emerged that is neurotic with idleness and pointlessness. (The Red River Gorge in Kentucky was saved from flooding by the Corps of Engineers because when our governor asked the Corps *why* they wanted to obliterate so much natural beauty, they could not give an answer.)

It is good to know, on the other hand, that a small community can fight and can win against the restless greed of investment capital and botchers of all breeds. A nameless town in California has so far held out over a sudden influx of developers and do-gooders working together. The do-gooders noticed the town when it was gunked up by an oil spill (halt and give some time to the ironies that criss-cross here). During the clean-up it was noticed that the community had an inadequate sewer system. This attracted the money boys from a water company, who convinced the state that vast sums must be spent to get everybody onto a flushing toilet. This alerted the osmagogue bankers, who alerted the real-estate gang. As long as this community—half retired folk, largely hermits, half young utopians who had fled the city—was to be modernized, so thought the developers,

⁵ NEW BURLINGTON: THE LIFE AND DEATH OF AN AMERICAN VILLAGE, by John Baskin. Norton. \$9.95.

let's pop in resort hotels, Burger Kings, miniature golf, redwood-shingle condominiums, and let's see these old geezers and hippies clear the hell out.

The struggle and triumph of this community (not named, for its own protection) is presented in a thoroughly good book.⁶ Orville Schell, who has written well and humanely about Chinese communes, shows how a community that is eccentric, almost centerless, and even casual, can knit together and drive away the bulldozer, sanitary engineer, and real-estate shark. He presents his problem in a paragraph that it would be brutal to paraphrase:

A town which is a community is a delicate organism. As yet, it has virtually no legal means at its disposal by which to protect itself from those who choose to search it out. Unlike an individual, it cannot sue for invasion of privacy. It cannot effectively determine how many people can live in it. It cannot even decide for itself the number of visitors with which it feels comfortable. The roads are there; anyone may travel on them. A commercial establishment is free to advertise the town's name and its desirable attributes in the hopes of attracting people to it in order to make money. If the people who call that town home find the influx of people, cars, and money unsettling, they have little recourse.

If those words were attributed to a New England Conservative complaining about Italian immigrants, or to Robert Moses complaining about the influx of Puerto Ricans, they would outrage Liberal ears. Paradoxically they illustrate how accurately we must understand a writer's point of view. "Organism" is the word to hold onto. Schell's words are true, and astutely stated. The nature of the organism determines what kind of turbulence it can tolerate.

Poland survived the Second World War better than my hometown in South Carolina. Main Street has rotted into a waste land. Gracious old homes came down to make way for used-car lots, tacky little finance companies, and drive-in hamburger pavilions. The seven ancient oaks that stood around the house where Thomas Wolfe's sister lived fell to the power saw, and the house itself, deporched, hokied up with neon and Coca-Cola signs, was islanded in a desolation of tar paving and converted into an eatery called, with that genius of the destroyer for taunting, The Seven Oaks. Some two miles of magnolia shade became a glare of festooned light bulbs, and all the used-car dealers are named Shug and Bubber, a semiology I am not equipped to explore. The ugliness of it all is visual migraine. And yet a mayor and his councilmen let it happen. The American politician may be a psychological type, like the kleptomaniac, peeping tom, or exhibitionist. He is the only professional who may apply for a job and present as his credentials the blatant and unashamed fact that he has none. (Lincoln Steffens was surprised to discover that city

⁶ *THE TOWN THAT FOUGHT TO SAVE ITSELF*, by Orville Schell, with photographs by Ilka Hartmann. Pantheon Books. \$15.00.

management throughout Europe requires a college degree.) But the explanation of why our cities are being uglified is not to be found wholly in political venality, capitalistic exploitation, greed, and carelessness, or any one force.

The history of a city ought to disclose how it came to be what it is. John and LaRee Caughey have put together a composite "history" of that monster metropolis Los Angeles.⁷ The apologies for the word *history* is because the book is an anthology of short passages from over a hundred writers. The method seems appropriate for a sprawling subject, the locale of such contrasts (Hollywood and Watts, UCLA and Sunset Boulevard). I suspect the book is of greatest interest to Angelenos themselves, though it is a marvelous book to read around in. It makes the tacit assumption that no American city of such size can be got between the pages of a book. The word *history* is wonderfully tricky when applied to a city. One can write the history of England better than the history of London. In another sense, the history of Los Angeles can be written sometime in the next century, but not now.

A more thorough and integral history of a city is Roger Sale's of Seattle.⁸ This is a model of how city histories should be written. Seattle is a perfect example of the American city in that it was not an accidental pooling of settlers in its beginning, but a deliberate act by stalwart citizens who had come to found a city. The university, the neighborhoods, the businesses, the bank, practically all the elements were decided on as the first buildings went up. We think of the westward expansion as so many pioneers clearing the wilderness for *farms*; that's mythology—they were colonists who had the plans of cities in their heads, the first since Greeks and Romans set out from *mother cities* (*metropolites*) to reproduce examples of the model they came from.

Professor Sale, a highly skilled and spirited writer, gives us each epoch of Seattle's history in fine detail. He knows that cities are really so many people, and inserts full biographies throughout. He gives a lucid account of the city's economic and sociological history; he knows its institutions and newspapers. Most importantly, he knows the city's lapses and false steps; not a syllable of chauvinism or whitewashing mars these pages. The book is therefore vigorous in its honesty and in the range of its considerations; it is as good on labor leaders (Dave Beck) as on intellectuals (Vernon Parrington). It is a speculative book that can discuss the benefit of good high schools and parks, and can explain how the American labor movement, which by rights ought to have emerged as leftist and radical (as the Seattle friend of Mao, Anna Louise Strong, urged), became rightist and conservative.

A city's history can be done in finer and finer detail. You can zone off a decade, as Michael Lesy has done with the twenties in Louisville, or study neighborhoods family by family, as Roslyn Banish has done with a

⁷ LOS ANGELES: BIOGRAPHY OF A CITY, by John and LaRee Caughey. University of California Press. \$14.95.

⁸ SEATTLE, PAST TO PRESENT, by Roger Sale. University of Washington Press. \$12.95.

London and a Chicago neighborhood, or trace a single family through six generations.⁹ Lesy, who began his method of composite history with *Wisconsin Death Trip*, repeats that work with Louisville in Prohibition times. Using photographs from the commercial firm of Caulfield and Shook, police and insane-asylum records, he constructs, with what seems to me like morbidity and gratuitous cynicism, a sustained surrealistic picture of the period. His point, of course, is that's the way they chose to see themselves—Masons in all their gaudy trappings, blacks at lodge banquets, society folk looking superior, T-Model wrecks, prehistoric Gulf stations, promotion photos by go-getter salesmen. A lot of the surrealism is, I'm afraid, mere psychological tone. Similar photographs of the 1860's we would perceive as History. These things come in phases: today's junk is tomorrow's antique, etc., but the process has some subtle quality one can't pin down. Lesy makes the age seem indecent; I grew up in it, and don't remember it that way at all. The present moment is far tackier (he would probably agree), and it is true, as he claims, that newspapers speak in a tongue all their own. And all documents in a neutral voice (police recorder, case histories from the asylum) tell us more about the institution keeping such files than about the subject. It is Lesy's hope that raw documents speak for themselves, and that captionless photographs are powerfully meaningful. I have my doubts. The method seems to me to be a bit cocky and fraudulent. The truth of a period cannot be summoned by a few eloquent photographs and a batch of newspaper clippings. It is the equivalent of trying to understand the Second World War from newsreels alone.

Roslyn Banish supplements her photographs of London and Chicago families with responsible statistics and with commentaries by the subjects themselves. She also allowed the subjects to choose their setting (almost invariably the best-looking room, as they thought) and pose. Ms. Banish is a canny photographer, giving us in splendid light just enough detail to complete the portraits (a coat-hanger inexplicably in a living room, a dimstore Gainsborough over a policeman's mantel), and an even canner sociologist to have conceived and carried out her project. She has made a book from which one learns about people in a particular and piquant way without any violation of their privacy, without condescension, and with gentleness toward their vulnerability. There is more respect for human beings in these photographs than I have ever seen a photographer achieve. One falls in love with the eighty-year-old Alice Williams in the first photograph (love birds, electric heater, paper flowers) and remains in awe of the dignity of these homefolks right up to a smiling Irish Chicago police sergeant in the last. I liked Douglas Humphreys (butler, Buckingham Palace), who looks like the Hon. Gally Threepwood in Wodehouse, part of whose interview recalls a buffet supper for heads of state after Churchills'

⁹ REAL LIFE: LOUISVILLE IN THE TWENTIES, by *Michael Lesy*. Pantheon Books. \$15.95. CITY FAMILIES: CHICAGO AND LONDON, by *Roslyn Banish*. Pantheon Books. \$7.95. HANNAH'S DAUGHTERS: SIX GENERATIONS OF AN AMERICAN FAMILY: 1876-1976, by *Dorothy Gallagher*. Thomas Y. Crowell Co. \$10.95.

funeral: "I was entertaining myself a few moments with Mr. Khrushchev. Oh yes, now he had two bodyguards and an interpreter with him. I took off his greatcoat and I felt the eyes of those burly guards. I hung his greatcoat up and I said to the interpreter, 'Just tell your two men to relax. I'm on duty on the occasion of Her Majesty's Royal Household.' And I added, 'One day I should like to pay a visit to your country, sir.' He . . . actually shook hands." One feels that Humphreys was *comforting* Comrade K., and not even Trollope could have thought of such a wonderful moment.

Dorothy Gallagher's *Hannah's Daughters* is an oral history, taken down in a series of interviews, of six generations of a Washington family of Dutch descent, members of all of them being alive in August 1973, a chain of daughters reaching from the 97-year-old Hannah to her two-year-old great-great-great granddaughter. The hundred photographs illustrating the narratives progress from tintype to Polaroid. The text has the interest of good talk, and covers a great deal of American history in very American voices (" . . . everybody was kissing everybody. It was really something. That was V-E Day. It was absolutely wild. I didn't think there *were* that many people.") Gertrude Stein would have liked this book, and even tried to write it, the wrong way round, in *The Making of Americans*. Family history has traditionally been a woman's preserve. And what a distance there is from "They'd kill a hog and I'd get the fat cleaned off the hog intestines to make lard. I was quick at that" to "Even if Tony had an affair, if it was a quickie affair, I'm sure we'd still be together. If it was a long one, I'm sure we'd get a divorce."

The inner life of the city—voices, children, baths, meals—has not undergone any substantial change since Jericho, the oldest city still inhabited. When Odysseus was finally united with Penelope, they talked all night in a cozy bed, under sheepskin covers. Children and the old are the same the world over. Only public lives are different: the automobile and airplane have made us nomads again. The city seems to be obsolete, a sense of community evaporates in all this mobility and stir. As persuasion is impotent in so distracted a world, and as our legislators seem to be mere pawns of lobbies, their hands hourly open to bribes, we must stoically wait out whatever awful hiatus there is to be between the technological destruction of the only known unit of civilization, the city, and its logical and natural re-invention, however that is to come about. Meanwhile, as a voice says in Zukofsky's *A-18*,

. . . all
their world's done to change the world is
to make it more ugly to the airport.

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